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EXPLORING THE EXTERNAL BARRIERS FACED BY FEMALE MILITARY
SPOUSES IN PURSUIT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

By Richelle Keilholz

This dissertation has been read and approved as fulfilling the partial requirement for the
Degree of Doctor of Education in Curriculum and Leadership.

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By
Richelle Keilholz

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Education
in Curriculum and Leadership
(HIGHER EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION)

Columbus State University
Columbus, GA

May 2020

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DEDICATION

To my mother, Antionette.

Thank you for showing me what hard work and dedication looks like. I am the person
that I am today because of you.

To my husband and son, Douglas and Raylan.

Thank you for standing by me through every step of this process and believing in me
when I doubted. I could not have done this without you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many individuals whom I would like to thank for helping me along this journey. First, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my Chair, Dr. Kimberly McElveen. Her ongoing words of encouragement kept me motivated through this process. This accomplishment would not have been possible without her. Secondly, I would like to thank Dr. Kimberly Gill for standing by my side from the very beginning. She helped me find my passion and instructed me on how to carry it through the program. Finally, I would also like to thank my methodologist, Dr. Jennifer Lovelace, for taking the time to work with me. It has been such a pleasure working with these intelligent and committed women.

I would also like to thank all my co-workers (across Columbus, Fayetteville, Statesboro, and Savannah) for standing by me through the highs and lows of this journey. If it were not for their unwavering listening ability, I would not have been able to dedicate time and effort to my work continuously. Thank you for never giving up on me, especially during those really rough days of statistics.

Finally, I would also like to thank all my friends and family. Thank you to my dearest friends, Sarah, Kate, and Dare, who never stopped believing in my abilities. I am so grateful for our friendship. Thank you to my parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and everyone else in between. I appreciate all your kind words. Last but not least, I would like to thank my husband and son. Their patience and encouragement gave me the strength to complete this degree. They never stopped believing and always showed me their love and support.

ABSTRACT

The study discusses the insufficient amount of research concerning the unique barriers faced by female military spouses in the pursuit of higher education. Although the information on military veterans in education has increased exponentially over the last decade, little is known about their female spouses. By adopting a narrative analysis approach to qualitative research, the study explored the perspectives of female military spouses and the barriers they may face in pursuit of higher education. Seven female military spouses were asked to complete 30-minute to 60-minute interviews with the researcher, to consider a more personalized experience. The following three primary research questions guided this study: For female military spouses, how has the military lifestyle impacted their educational experience? What perceptions do female military spouses have on how the military lifestyle has shaped their access and retention ability in their educational program? What are the personal experiences of female military spouses, regarding the barriers or challenges of pursuing a college degree? By analyzing the personal responses used throughout the study, the researcher was able to dissect reoccurring trends and themes during data collection and analysis. The themes found through the data collection process were geographic stability, program accessibility, institutional knowledge and support, and community support and assistance. The results of this study may inform post-secondary institutions and affiliated policymakers about these students, in hopes that new indicatives may be created to assist this under-served community.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

As the establishment of higher education adapts and changes through time, so does the need to understand the students who matriculate within it. As globalization continues to drive the diversity of higher education, post-secondary institutions must take on the challenge of meeting the demands of the changing population (Yusof, Hashm, Valdez, & Yaacob, 2018). Analyzing the trends in student populations includes looking into the unique circumstances surrounding each individual. Many of these unique circumstances go beyond race, gender, or socioeconomic status. Those men and women found within the military community are examples of individuals facing unique circumstances as they matriculate through post-secondary education. There has been an increase in research regarding military service members and college enrollment since the Global War on Terror began after the September 11th terrorist attacks. Scholars, such as Cohen (2013) and Kelley, Fox, and Smith (2013), have analyzed the expansion of military personnel enrollment in higher education and provided data surrounding enrollment trends of this specific population. However, there is very little data concerning another important demographic of the military population: the female military spouse. Although service members and their female spouses may be categorized together when discussing challenges in higher education, their experiences may be very different. People who are not associated with the military population may not be aware of the

distinct barriers faced by female military spouses in pursuit of higher education (Brown, 2011). The following is an analysis of female military spouses and the challenges they may face while pursuing higher education.

Statement of the Problem

The life of a military spouse goes beyond the uniform. Between the duty stations, deployments, and the constant reality that the United States government makes all the decisions, life for a service member and their family is never easy. Data published by the Military Child Education Coalition (2017) estimate that active duty military families move three times more frequently than families who are not associated with the military. This reality makes pursuing long-term goals, such as education, more difficult (Burrell, Adams, Durand, & Castron, 2006). Research over the last 10 years has provided insight into the educational journeys of military veterans and their dependents (Gleiman, 2012). Researchers, such as Hart and Thompson (2016) and Kurzynski (2014), all emphasize that mental and physical impact military service has on both veterans and their families. In addition, researchers like Clever and Segal (2013) and Fishback (2015) also indicate that there is a special need to identify and understand military populations on college campuses. However, the predominant focus has remained on active-duty service members and war-returning veterans, not on military spouses (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). In order for institutions to accommodate this special group of students, an understanding of these individuals and their challenges must take place.

“Student service members and veterans and their family members may perceive themselves as having unique experiences that set them apart from other students” (Hitt et al., 2015, p. 537). Achieving academic goals is a challenge for any “non-traditional”

student (Lin, 2016), including people involved in military life. This challenge is especially prominent in the areas of employment, family responsibilities, and maintaining social and spiritual connections (Karczewski, 2008). According to the latest study completed by the Office of the Deputy Assistant of the Secretary of Defense (2015), there are an estimated 591,505 female military spouses of active duty service members in the United States. Although female military spouses make up only approximately 0.18% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), much is still unknown about this demographic and the types of external barriers they face when trying to obtain some form of higher education. According to Hayes (2011), research surrounding this topic is limited, which creates insufficient resources for the U.S. Department of Defense to use while establishing educational programs.

Military service members contribute to the security and welfare of the United States; female spouses play a large role in that contribution. Researchers, such as Segal and Segal (2004) and Cline (2014), agree that in order to keep active military service members satisfied with their life and career choices, they must feel that their family members are supported. According to Castaneda and Harrell (2008) and Klein, Tatone, and Lindsay (1989), military service members derive motivation from knowing that their family members are adequately cared for in all areas of life. If institutions of higher education cannot appropriately accommodate this small (yet important) group of individuals because they are not aware of these barriers, shortcomings in this area will only increase (Brown & Gross, 2011).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify and analyze the external barriers faced by military spouses when pursuing higher education. Through qualitative data collection and analysis, each female military spouse participating in the study was allowed to tell her individual story. By documenting the personal perspectives from each participant, a deeper understanding of the topic was understood. The information and knowledge brought forth by the study may also assist higher education administrators making informed decisions on policy and programs that impact this student population. Furthermore, the study aimed to identify the gaps in research in order to establish future areas of examination and analysis.

Research Questions

The following research questions directed the study and established a baseline for data collection and analysis. The purpose of the research questions was to understand this topic from a qualitative standpoint.

Qualitative Research Questions:

- For female military spouses, how has the military lifestyle impacted their educational experience?
- What perceptions do female military spouses have on how the military lifestyle has shaped their access and retention ability in their educational program?
- What are the personal experiences of female military spouses regarding the barriers or challenges of pursuing a college degree?

In addition, the following sub-questions were explored during the qualitative research process:

- Based on personal experience, what are some of the programs or resources believed to be missing from institutions, specifically regarding support services for military spouses?
- How can the U.S. military better assist female military spouses in their educational pursuits?

Theoretical Framework

For this study, the theoretical framework that was used to detail the relationships between female military spouses and the barriers they face while pursuing higher education is retention theory. In addition, sub-theories of self-efficacy and sense of belonging were also used to contribute toward the study's theoretical framework. Tinto (2017) establishes the connection between retention theory and the student's perception of persistence, by using key concepts involving Allen's (1999) work on motivation and persistence, as well as Bean and Eaton's (2002), psychological model of college student retention. Although this study does not go into depth on Allen's (1999) and Bean and Eaton's (2000) research, they are important to mention for future analysis. A student's perception of their self-efficacy and sense of belonging also contribute to their motivations for remaining enrolled (retention) and should be addressed. The qualitative analysis of this study aligned with the theories listed.

According to literature by Bean and Eaton (2002), student participation in higher education is a voluntary process; however, the policies and practices set forth by the institution play an active role in a student's decision to remain in school. The original

works of Tinto (1987) state that the literature about student retention is often filled with stereotypes and has little validity in terms of understanding why students choose to stay in school. Many institutions view the issue of retention through a lens of institutional interest; however, the student's perspective is often overlooked. In order to establish why female military spouses choose to enroll in school and the obstacles they may face during their enrollment, institutions need to understand the military spouse education experience through a different lens. By identifying these challenges, a commitment can be made to counteract them.

One key component of the retention theory is the idea of self-efficacy and a person's belief in their ability to succeed in a given situation or task. Depending on personal experiences, some students may have a strong sense of self-efficacy, while others may not (Tinto, 2017). Hall and Ponton (2005) state that there is more to educational development than just providing students with academic skills. Institutions must also assist in reshaping a student's ability to succeed. For those students who may be facing unusual circumstances or unfamiliar barriers, having a strong sense of self-efficacy is important for success. Female military spouses are often faced with challenges uncommon to many educational systems (Gleiman, 2012). As a critical component of student retention, self-efficacy must be looked at from a perspective unique to the female military spouse population.

The sense of belonging concept addresses how students see themselves as a member of a community, which includes their value amongst faculty, staff, and other students (Tinto, 2017). The campus climate plays a large role in how students relate and engage in the institution. For the student, campus climate refers to the academic and non-

academic support services offered to female military spouses on college campuses. All members of the campus community must be invested in serving the interest of each student, especially for those students who may feel marginalized by their life circumstances. At no point in a student's educational career should they feel out of place or unrepresented due to a lack of understanding. When students feel a sense of belonging with their community, a mutual bond is formed, and a commitment to success in the face of challenge may be established (Tinto, 1987). Female military spouses are part of an exclusive community established by the commonalities accompanied by serving the U.S. Armed Forces (Cline, 2014). Many of those female military spouses pursuing higher education may not feel as if they belong to a campus community or as if their needs are being met given their lifestyles.

The purpose of this study was to connect the concepts discussed within this section and the experiences told by those female military spouses who participated in the research. By identifying the similarities between the theoretical framework and the feedback given by each individual, a new understanding of this topic can be developed, and future research may continue to provide new perspectives into the issue.

Methodology Overview

By adopting a narrative approach to qualitative analysis, the study explored the perspectives of female military spouses and the barriers they may face in pursuit of higher education. Qualitative research focuses on providing in-depth insight and perspective into a study (Moser & Korstiens, 2017). Qualitative research is defined as the type of research that analyzes non-numerical data, such as words and pictures (Johnson and Christensen, 2017). In addition, qualitative data are most often used when researchers

are looking to find out more about a topic or phenomenon. A narrative approach is when “the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives” (Creswell, 2014, p. 15). It is meant to focus on the experiences of participants and how those experiences impact their perceptions on a certain topic research.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The purpose of inclusionary and exclusionary criteria is to provide a distinct sample of participants who can provide a variety of perspectives into their experiences. In order to qualify to participate in the study, the following inclusionary criteria must have been met: (a) the participant must be female, (b) legally married to an active duty service member (any branch), and (c) enrolled in any college program (either traditional or online). The exclusionary criteria for this study included the following: (a) non-female military spouses, (b) individuals who were not married to an active duty military service member, and (c) spouses who were not currently enrolled in some form of college program.

Participants

Because social media plays a significant role in today’s social interactions, two Facebook support groups for military spouses were used to recruit participants for this study. Seven female military spouses were recruited and provided full disclosure of the study that was taking place. A flyer/post was displayed on female military spouse support group sites, listing the basic details of the study and how those individuals who may be interested could contact the researcher. On the recruitment announcement, interested candidates were asked to contact the researcher directly via personal email or Facebook

Messenger. After the researcher asked some basic qualifying criteria questions, the participant was sent information on the study (see Letter to Prospective Participant in Appendix B) and asked if she would like to take part in a recorded interview between herself and the researcher. If the potential participant agreed to take part in the study, a consent form (see Informed Consent Form in Appendix C) was sent for the participant to fill out. The potential participant signed the Informed Consent Form and provided her interview availability on the form. A confirmation email (see Participant Confirmation Email in Appendix D) was sent, specifying the date and time of the phone interview.

Data Collection

Before the interview began, the researcher and the participant briefly reviewed the Pre-Interview Checklist (see Pre-Interview Checklist in Appendix D). From there, a series of pre-established research questions was asked of the participant during the interview and recorded by the researchers using a recording device. The researcher used an audio transcribing service, Rev.com, to transcribe each interview. Only the researcher had access to the data, which was securely locked inside the researcher's home. The data will be kept on file for a period of three years. Each participant's identity was kept confidential, and only aliases were used to distinguish between participants. Participants were given a copy of their transcribed interviews to ensure validity of the content.

Data Analysis

After transcription and participant verification were completed, the researcher used Nvivo12 (QSR International, 2019) to sort the transcripts for themes and sub-themes, while also coding the data by hand. By categorizing themes and sub-themes found within each interview, the researcher was able to analyze and draw conclusions on

the personal experiences of different female military spouses. Understanding the similarities and differences between each participant is crucial for providing recommendations for further research and discussions.

Limitations and Delimitations

Based on the organization of the proposed study, the following limitations and delimitations were assumed. The first limitation was the female military spouses participating in the study. Although the study aimed to discover how the military lifestyle contributes to the barriers faced by female military spouses while pursuing education, additional factors not related to the military may also create barriers. The limitations associated with non-military related barriers may be learning disabilities or financial instability. A second limitation was the location of the participants. Because the study was not limited to one state or geographic location, the participants' experiences may be different compared to the experiences of students matriculating within one area.

Another limitation was the currency of the available research related to the study. The research conducted on the military community has primarily been focused on active duty service members and veterans transitioning into civilian life. There seems to be an insufficient amount of information on female military spouses. Some of the information available on the topic of female military spouses, or military spouses in general, may not be considered the most current, meaning the studies were published more than five years ago. Although the information available may seem outdated or obsolete, it is necessary to mention for several important reasons. First, it is important to understand the history and literature available on female military spouses, no matter how invalid it may seem. Understanding historical perspectives provides context for future research. Second, the

lack of currently available resources proves that studies, such as this one, are needed to bring various fields up to date on modern information.

The delimitation of the study was that the researcher chose only to include female military spouses, and the male military spouse perspective was not explored. The researcher was a female military spouse of an active duty service member and was also enrolled in a degree program. Due to the shared experiences, the researcher has lived within the military community, and there may be some assumptions made regarding the participants and the obstacles they may be facing during their educational journey.

Definition of Terms

- *Barriers* are considered any form of challenge or obstacle that keeps an individual from achieving their goals (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012).
- *Military Deployment* is the process of sending service members to a place of military action. This process can last from a few months to over a year. (Harrell, Lim, Castaneda, & Golinelli, 2004).
- *Military Friendly* is considered a distinction (set forth by an outside association) that meets the needs of military-affiliated students, through the use of targeted programming, services, and initiatives (Brown & Gross, 2011).
- *A military spouse* is an individual legally married to another individual actively serving in the U.S. military (Harrell et al., 2004).
- *Military orders* are an official document sent by a military branch listing the date and location of a service member's current duty station.

- *MyCAA Scholarship* stands for the My Career Advancement Account Scholarship, which provides qualifying military spouses up to \$4,000 in tuition assistance (Military OneSource, 2018).
- *Permanent change of station (PCS)* is the relocation of a military service member and his or her family to another duty station within the United States or overseas (Military OneSource, 2019).
- *Post-9/11 GI Bill* is a benefit offered through the U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs that assists military veterans and their families with education benefits. These benefits include tuition assistance, housing expenses, book costs, and other additional fees (Bailey, Drury, & Grandy, 2019).
- *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)* is a condition associated with a traumatic event and may cause distress or impairments in daily activities (Cushing, Braun, Alden, & Katz, 2018).
- *Temporary duty station (TDY)* is the process of sending service members to a temporary duty station for training (Military OneSource, 2019).

Significance of the Study

With a more holistic understanding of the challenges and experiences faced by female military spouses in pursuit of higher education, those entities directly involved with the process may be able to address these concerns with a more proactive approach. Specifically, the research from this study may be published or presented through educational groups on military installations. According to Johnson et al. (2007) and Goldner (1988), despite the significant increase in military population since the terrorist attacks in 2001, the condition of females being historically marginalized continues to be a

problem. Because of the unique factors that make up the military lifestyle, female spouses have had to develop new ways to overcome the hurdles they face daily. These women are familiar with the “mission first” mentality that comes with being a part of the military culture, and female military spouses frequently set aside their wants and needs in order to support the service members and the families they share. In a study conducted by Mailey, Mershon, Joyce, and Irwin (2018), military spouses were asked to complete surveys and participate in focus groups to determine the most commonly reported barriers associated with health behaviors. There were 230 individuals who participated in the study, and each participant provided information regarding his or her personal experiences. Participants were asked to provide insight into their wants and needs, as well as the obstacles they have faced during the pursuit of those needs. These wants and needs included achieving education and career goals (Mailey et al., 2018). The significance of this study was to gather personal narratives from female military spouses who currently may be experiencing some of the challenges associated with living the military lifestyle while pursuing a college program.

The research concerning the specialized needs of the military community assists those individuals currently serving and those individuals who have previously served (as well as their families) in reintegrating themselves into non-combat affiliated cultures. While research is an essential step to understanding the needs of the military community, it is the responsibility of different organizations to familiarize themselves with specific groups who are experiencing difficulty or disregard in certain situations. Educational institutions are one of the organizations that need to acquaint themselves with these populations. According to the National Military Family Association (2011), military

spouses typically face difficulties in everyday activities that are usually not understood by their civilian counterparts. If institutions want to consider themselves “military friendly”, then they must be willing to explore the unknown perspectives of the students they intend to serve. This study intended to assist in those endeavors, with the hope that a new perspective may be expressed to those people who are unaware.

Summary

By understanding the barriers faced by female military spouses in pursuit of higher education, post-secondary institutions and the U.S. military may be able to assist these individuals in matriculating through their programs. This study explored the perspectives of female military spouses and explain how their experiences in education require a specialized understanding of the military population.

The study will be organized into the following chapters. Chapter II will be a review of the literature, specifically involving the increase in the military population, military education benefits, enrollment trends of female military spouses, and external stressors faced by female military spouses who are pursuing higher education. Chapter III will outline the design of the qualitative study, including how and where the participants were chosen, the role of the researcher within the study, as well as the data collection and analysis process. Given the understanding of the theoretical framework discussed in Chapter I and Chapter II, a comparison of the theories will also be assessed based on the findings. Chapter IV will present the results and findings of the data, followed by a summary of the research. This summary will include the interpretation of the themes and sub-themes pulled from the interview transcripts. Chapter V will offer offering conclusions and recommendations to future scholars regarding possible follow up studies.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Opportunities for obtaining a post-secondary education have never been more achievable, which is especially true with online and distance education programs. Students now have the opportunity to enroll in programs and take classes from anywhere in the world. Distance learning and online instruction have changed the way people of all ages access higher education. Over the last decade, countless studies have been conducted on the new accessibility of education; however, certain groups of individuals may face obstacles regardless of educational program accessibility. One particular group of individuals vulnerable to the obstacles to accessing higher education is female military spouses (National Military Family Association, 2011). Although military spouses have been a significant part of the military population, very little known about this demographic of individuals. The scarcity of information is especially noticeable when analyzed from an education perspective (Ott, Kelley Morgan, & Akroyd, 2018). The following literature review will be a collection of information gathered from researchers in the field of education and military affairs regarding the barriers faced by female military spouses in pursuit of higher education. The chapter will include (a) the impact and after-effects of September 11, 2011, and the military community; (b) the increase in the military population over the last eighteen years; (c) military education benefits; (d) military-friendly institutions; (e) female military spouse enrollment trends; and (f) the external stressors associated with living the military lifestyle. The purpose of this

literature review was to draw parallels between the barriers faced by female military spouses and the completion of college degree programs. Once a compilation of the literature has been established, the remaining chapters will consist of the development and implementation of the proposed research study.

Impact and After-Effects of September 11, 2001 on the Military Community

On the morning of September 11, 2001, the United States of America experienced its most significant terrorist attack in history. Over several hours, multiple commercial airlines were hijacked and flown into largely populated buildings like the Twin Towers at the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Virginia. According to Convard, Lock, and Brichard (2016), the death toll from that attack reached 2,986, including firefighters, police officers, airplane passengers, and crew members. Those numbers have continued to climb as the years have passed as a result of the exposure to harmful chemicals and conditions encountered by those individuals who assisted in the rescue efforts. For many, the September 11th terrorist attacks will have a profound impact on the international relationships held by the United States of America and its opposing countries. It is thought that the increase in the U.S. armed forces between the years 2001 and 2010 was largely in response to the events of September 11, 2001.

Through identification of the al-Qaeda network as the responsible party for the terror attacks on September 11, 2001 and continued surveillance on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, President George W. Bush officially declared U.S. involvement in the Global War on Terror (Rogers, 2004). Although the organizational process of such a large-scale initiative took several weeks, it was the goal of the U.S. government to understand the challenges associated with this type of warfare and collectively agree on

the best tactical approach. However, within weeks of the September 11th terrorist attacks, the United States began seeing an escalated focus on establishing a large-scale military force that would be prepared to embark on a generation-long mission of securing the safety of the United States and its citizens.

According to a study conducted by Wells et al. (2012), the U.S. military in the 1990s did not meet the expected recruiting goals established by the Department of Defense. However, a significant increase in military personnel rose after the September 11, 2001 terror attacks and reached its peak in November of 2001. The purpose of the study was to analyze the mental health outcomes of military service members before and after the September 11th terrorist attacks took place. Through this analysis, the researchers discovered possible impacts and after-effects of September 11th and in the military community. In the study, 72,172 participants utilized a self-reporting questionnaire to discuss pre- and post-September 11th mental health outcomes. Wells et al. (2012) indicate that, based on discussion and feedback from study participants, the terror attacks on September 11th and the wartime battles with Iraq and Afghanistan likely induced an overwhelming sense of patriotism and pride within U.S. citizens. This feeling of pride caused a substantial increase in volunteers. Although the report indicated that men and women steadily served in the U.S. armed forces, the surge did not occur until the terror attacks on New York and Virginia.

It is significantly important to understand the impact and after-effects of the September 11th terrorist attacks on the military population. In order to be able to analyze the increase in military service members (as well as their families) over the last decade and the unique experiences that surround their lifestyles, an overall understanding of

what ignited the increase must be reported. The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 are perceived to have played a meaningful role in shaping the current military community. The purpose of this study was to discover additional information about this small population and create the context to support the need for additional research.

Increase in Military Population

Due to the September 11th attacks and the inflated conflicts overseas, the last few decades have seen a large surge in the United States military population. In addition to an increase in active military personnel, this growth also can be seen within families. Men, women, and children of all ages actively make up a large part of the armed forces community. According to Kessler (2012), from the beginning of the Global War on Terrorism to the present (as of 2012), over 1.7 million U.S. military members have served in Iraq, Afghanistan, and over 20 other major military installations around the world. With this increase, there are a large number of men, women, and children associated with the U.S. military population. With an increased military population comes the need to understand the goals and lifestyle challenges faced by military service members and their families. In 2015, an estimated 564,000 female military spouses across the United States; 70% of them were under the age of 35 years old (Baldor, 2016). Many of these spouses place high importance on continuing their education and securing employment in the future (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2007). The need to understand this growing population is necessary for the success of many industries, including industries involving education. Although some of the information available on female military spouses and higher education is valuable, it is often viewed as outdated or unrepresentative of the modern population (Ott et al., 2018). Thus, the increase of the military population has

driven the need for new information on female military spouses and the barriers they may face when seeking a college education.

Clever and Segal (2013) discussed the demographics of military families and the changes the military community has seen since 1973. In 1973, the U.S. military evolved into an all-volunteer force, which caused the research community to take a closer look at what made up the modern military population. In 2001, after the September 11th terrorist attacks, the researchers had to re-evaluate the workings of the military population once again, specifically focusing on the increase in the modern military family. According to Clever and Segal (2013), early research describes military families as high-ranking officers and their wives. However, after the September 11th terrorist attacks, military families began to look much different. A large portion of today's military community was made up of younger, larger families. The research by Clever and Segal (2013) indicate that military spouses and children outnumber service members four to one, meaning that the military community was largely made up of spouses and children. However, the research involving military spouses and children is much harder to come by, and research was needed to acknowledge the diversity of the military families and their lifestyles. "Thus, the best practices and programs to help military families and children are flexible and adaptable rather than rigidly structured" (Clever & Segal, 2013, p. 13).

In order to understand the diverse and unique population that is the female military spouse community, it is crucial to understand the increase in the overall military population. A younger and more diverse group of people joining the U.S. armed forces brought a need for new research in all areas of academia. The purpose of this study was to explore the external barriers faced by female military spouses in pursuit of higher

education. The first step in investigating this area of research is to understand the history and composition of the sample. In this study, the sample focused explicitly on female military spouses. Based on the exploration and analysis conducted by researchers, such as Clever and Segal (2013), the sample was determined to be much more complex than it was 50 years ago.

Military Education Benefits

In response to the events of World War II, the U.S. government created The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, also called the GI (Government Issue) Bill of Rights. The bill that was signed by Franklin D. Roosevelt) provided not only education and training benefits but also home loans and subsidies for unemployment (Greenburg, 2008). The purpose of the GI Bill of Rights was to provide service members with the resources they needed to transition from the military lifestyle back into the civilian lifestyle. The U.S. government was looking to correct the mistakes made with returning World War I service members by offering more intentional methods of assistance (Kowalski, 2016). According to Thelin (2004), the GI Bill of Rights created an overall increase in the accessibility of education to service members. As a result, institutions experienced a surge in enrollment numbers, requiring new initiatives and infrastructure to accommodate the growing student population. Through the growth and development of the military population on campus, colleges and universities across the country began to understand the importance of recognizing these individuals and their unique needs.

Since the original GI Bill was enacted in 1944, the service member benefit has morphed over the years. The Montgomery GI Bill, which formed in 1984, was an employee-matching incentive offered to all active duty service members during their

enlistment process (Bailey, Drury, & Grandy, 2019). Through the Montgomery GI Bill, service members contributed \$100.00 per month for their first year of service and, in return, received educational support upon their separation from the military (Bailey et al., 2019). An increase in military support during the Global War on Terrorism prompted a significant increase in military family education benefits and changes to the Montgomery GI Bill. In 2008, the Post-9/11 GI Bill was enacted and became one of the most massive educational programs offered through military service and supported by Veteran Affairs. This program not only provides tuition assistance to those individuals, but it can also assist in housing expenses, book costs, and other additional fees. In 2012, an estimated \$11 billion in military-supported education programs were distributed to service members and their families (Cohen, 2013). The majority of these benefits can be transferred to immediate family members, such as spouses and children.

Recent literature provided by the CPA Client Bulletin (2018) highlights the newest evolution of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which has been named the “Forever GI Bill”. The term “forever” refers to the unlimited time qualifying service members have to use their benefits. These benefits can also be transferred to spouses and children. To qualify for the Forever GI Bill, an individual only had to serve 90 days of active duty time after September 10, 2001. In addition, one of the following stipulations must also be met: (a) the service member must still be on active duty status, (b) the service member must have been honorably discharged from military service, or (c) medically discharged after serving at least 30 days (CPA Client Bulletin, 2018). Similar to the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the benefits from the Forever GI Bill contribute towards completion of certificate and degree programs, as well as qualifying courses in career training.

Since the opportunity to use military education benefits has become available to female military spouses, more institutions may begin to see an increase in military student enrollment. With accessibility changing, visibility of the female military spouse on college campuses may also change. To adequately prepare for an adjustment in student enrollment, an understanding of the female military spouse population must be analyzed more closely. Access to benefit resources is crucial for getting students on campus. However, if campuses do not understand the unorthodox lifestyle and challenges faced by its students, there will be little that can be done to assist those students in being successful.

Aside from the transfer of service member education benefits, such as the Post-9/11 GI Bill and now the Forever GI Bill, the U.S. military has created several programs and scholarships. After the ramp up of military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Pentagon began to recognize the shortage of educational and employment support programs for military spouses (Armario, 2012). This realization prompted the creation of a spouse-specific education benefit known as the Military Spouse Career Advancement Account (MyCAA). MyCAA provides qualifying military spouses of active duty service members \$4,000 towards diplomas, certificates, or associate degree programs in a select number of career fields (Military One Source Online, 2018). The benefit is only available to junior ranking service members (i.e., E1-E5, W1-W2, and O1-O2) and can only be applied to pre-approved programs. According to Armario (2012), the purpose of the MyCAA program is to provide military spouses the opportunity to gain experience and knowledge in career fields that are considered in-demand and easily transferrable. As

military families relocate frequently, the MyCAA program was intended to assist military spouses in obtaining educational opportunities that are suitable to their lifestyles.

The development of the MyCAA program was intended to assist military spouses in obtaining a post-secondary education in a career field. However, the limits of the program may be seen to outweigh the benefits. As stated previously, the program is geared towards providing training and instruction towards in-demand career fields. The MyCAA program scholarship does not contribute to associate degrees in areas of general studies or liberal arts (Armario, 2012). Limiting the area of study is one barrier that may be associated with keeping female military spouses from pursuing higher education. Although the Pentagon created a scholarship program to assist military spouses in post-secondary education completion and advancement, many spouses may shy away from applying because it does not cover expenses associated with their area of interest. Some of these expenses include books, uniforms, electronic devices, registration fees, and transportation. In addition, the scholarship program is only designated for the spouses of junior ranking soldiers. For those military spouses who are married to a mid-to-senior ranking soldier, the scholarship program is not available. For spouses of mid-to-senior ranking service members who may be using their Post-9/11 or Forever GI Bill, the option to apply for the MyCAA program scholarship is not obtainable. As these financial resources are some of the most well-known throughout the military community, female military spouses without these options may find navigating these challenges difficult.

Military Friendly Institutions

According to Lang and Powers (2011), feedback from the 2010 National Survey of Student Engagement reported that military veterans received significantly lower levels

of student support in higher education than their non-veteran counterparts. Although this survey was conducted only nine years ago, the lack of support for military-affiliated students has been evident in colleges across the United States for many years. Military affiliated students have reported increased feelings of loneliness while on campus and confusion regarding what benefits are available to them (Daly & Fox Garrity, 2013). To combat these concerns, recently many institutions have begun to distinguish themselves as “military friendly.” Military friendly is considered a distinction of an institution that is meeting the needs of military affiliated students, through the use of targeted programming, services, and initiatives (Brown & Gross, 2011). Many institutions pride themselves on this distinction and label their websites and marketing material with the coveted military-friendly seal of approval. The history of the military-friendly distinction is important to investigate for many reasons. It is crucial to note the history of the military-friendly institution and which criteria must be met in order to be distinguished as military friendly. In addition, examining the label and determining which students are being recognized through the program’s services will allow for a determination to be made on its overall effectiveness.

Just like many other military or veteran-focused initiatives, the military-friendly label was created in response to the Global War on Terror and the increase of those individuals serving in the U.S. armed forces. According to Dakduk (2014), with the reform of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in 2009 and the increased wartime efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, colleges and universities across the country began to see an influx in military personnel within higher education. In order to take advantage of an enrollment opportunity, many campuses began classifying themselves as military friendly or

“veteran friendly”. Once the term began to create momentum, the U.S. Department of Defense and advocates for military education advocated that set standards needed to be created for institutions to call themselves military friendly. In addition, media outlets and journalists began surveying colleges and universities on the services they offer to their military-affiliated students. These institutions were then ranked based on the criteria established by those conducting the survey (Dakduk, 2014). In April of 2012, President Barack Obama signed Executive Order 13607 (named Establishing Principles of Excellence in Education Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members) to force agencies of education to work together to support the military population (Heineman, 2015). Based on the literature outlined by Dakduk (2014), the Executive Order established the following practices that must be followed by institutions seeking to distinguish themselves as military friendly:

Provide students with a personalized form covering the total cost of an education program; provide educational plans for all military and veteran education beneficiaries; end fraudulent recruiting techniques and misrepresentations; accommodate service members and reservists absent due to service requirements; designate a point of contact to provide academic and financial advice; ensure accreditations of all new programs prior to enrolling students; and align institutional refund policies with those under Title IV, which governs the administration of federal student aid programs. (p. 7)

By establishing these guidelines, institutions of higher education and the federal government have aligned the requirements needed to support the military community.

However, the question arises as to the effectiveness of these efforts, specifically concerning female military spouses.

According to Wilson et al. (2016), the established criteria to be considered military friendly has created a broken and ill-advised system, used by colleges and universities in an attempt to increase enrollment. During their study, the authors composed a detailed list of practices military-friendly institutions should exhibit when working with military-affiliated students. The researched comprised a list of 73 practices, divided into 12 area categories, and developed a survey. The survey was issued to military personnel and higher education administrators to distinguish which practices were more important to those individuals who work directly with military students. Out of the 73 listed practices, those individuals who completed the survey noted that 43 practices were necessary, and 10 practices were critical. The following five area categories were defined as critical, including accreditation, educational programming, admission requirements/transfer credit opportunities, and financial/economic assistance (Wilson et al., 2016). The additional feedback provided to the researchers also reiterated that military students are faced with many challenges (i.e., continuous relocation, isolation from family support, and lack of knowledge of educational benefits) with which most college students and administrators are not familiar. However, these challenges can be counteracted through intentional processes and procedures.

When analyzing the information provided by Wilson et al. (2016), there were significant limitations listed at the end of the study. One of the primary limitations listed was the demographics of the sample who completed the survey. The majority of the participants (71% of 107) were either active duty service members or veterans in either

the Army, Army Reserve, or Army National Guard. In addition, 70% of the sample surveyed were male. Although the results provided by the research team were significant in providing additional information on military-friendly practices, it seems that the majority of the feedback is coming from one specific group of people. Female military spouses enrolled in higher education may have additional practices that they believe are crucial to assisting those individuals in the military community. Being labeled a military-friendly institution should require institutions to address the needs of everyone involved in the military community, not just those individuals who have served on active duty. Additional research is needed in order to show higher education administrators and those individuals working with the U.S. Department of Defense that the military community includes individuals who have never set foot on a battlefield.

Literature from Dillard and Yu (2016) discussed the failure of the education system in support of the military community and expressed the system's exploitation of benefits earned by those individuals who have served. The article provided a list of recommendations that institutions of higher education can adopt, in order to create an environment that is worthy of the label military friendly. By learning more about veterans and active duty service members, especially in relation to their diverse backgrounds and life circumstances, colleges and universities can establish specialized programs and services that cater to their needs. In addition, educational organizations need to adjust their perceptions of the military community and discontinue any preconceived ideas that may be circulating as to what services are considered important to military-affiliated students. There seems to be a substantial amount of outdated information that leads institutions to continue offering aid that is no longer applicable to those individuals who

are currently enrolled. Dillard and Yu (2016) recommended several new practices that may assist educational agencies in the creation of new military-friendly programs and services. To begin, research from Summerlot, Green, and Parker (2009) emphasizes the importance of establishing military-and veteran-run leadership organizations within each institution. By creating these organizations, military-affiliated students are able to partner and collaborate with other organizations on campus for the purpose of gain resources and exposure. In addition, creating organizational leadership within an institution's military community allows for critical issues or concerns to be streamlined through one singular source. Dillard and Yu (2016) also recommend required training for faculty and staff members, discussing the importance of supporting military students from the administrative/classroom perspective.

Rumann and Hamrick (2009) examined the importance of training faculty and staff members on military culture and the difficulties military students may face during their transition. Another recommendation included the creation of a designated military student space on campus. Although space does not have to be very big, there would need to be enough room for students to relax or gather in groups to discuss classwork. Forming that type of reserved space on campus may allow military students the opportunity to create a community within the institution. The final recommendation by Dillard and Yu (2016) created a separate veteran/military related first-year seminar course. The research indicated that first-year seminar students could develop a rapport with one another, in addition to developing strong professional relationships with faculty and staff. Military students are used to a collaborative group environment with fellow comrades but may struggle with working in a traditional class environment.

This psychological shock can be enough to overwhelm student veterans who are already at risk due to their time separated from a learning environment. The aforementioned social safety net identified by psychologists that can greatly assist veterans during periods of stress can also be applied in the classroom environment. (Dillard & Yu, 2016, p. 185)

Establishing new programs and services for military veterans is crucial in assisting with their overall academic success. However, the focus remains on only those men and women who are currently serving or have served in the U.S. military. Military spouses have been almost completely excluded from the plans to assist the military community in higher education. Female military spouses may be less concerned with a designated group space or separated first-year seminar class but more concerned with low-cost on-campus childcare. The needs of female military spouses are very different from those individuals of active duty service members or war-returning veterans. If colleges and universities are interested in meeting the needs of the military community, they must look further than those individuals who wear the uniform.

Military Spouse Enrollment Trends

Military spouses create an additional piece when analyzing military enrollment at the post-secondary level. Now more than ever, military spouses are putting high significance on the completion of their education. A study conducted by the National Military Family Association (2007) showed that 29% and 41% of military spouses were enrolled in an associate or bachelor's level program. Due to these students encountering their special type of non-academic stressors, these encounters must be specifically explored. Past research has indicated that, in addition to frequent relocations and

unpredictable work schedules, deployments have negatively impacted the educational enrollment for many military spouses (Harrell et al., 2014). Although a variety of educational opportunities are offered to military spouses in terms of access and funding, many experience difficulties trying to complete them. Friedman, Miller, and Evans (2015) found that, when analyzing how many spouses used the MyCAA scholarship, nearly one in five (18% of those respondents) had previously used the benefit. According to the survey results, out of the individuals who did not use the MyCAA scholarship program, 54% did not know the program existed. Based on the information provided from this 2015 survey, the desire to enroll in a post-secondary education program seems to be present in many female military spouses. However, there seems to be a disconnect during the enrollment phase.

Literature from Blue Star Families (2016) highlights the lack of available resources on military spouses regarding employment and educational pursuits. The organization contributes a large amount of the responsibility to the unsuccessful measures of the federal government. In 2004, researchers from the Research and Development Corporation's National Defense Research Institute conducted a study on the challenges associated with military spouse employment and education. Harrell et al. (2004) used interviews and data collected from over 1,100 military spouses to explore this phenomenon to educate military policymakers on the problem.

During one portion of the research, 800 military spouses from Harrell et al.'s (2004) study were asked questions regarding whether they believed the military lifestyle had an impact on the educational opportunities. Of the spouses who responded, "slightly fewer than one-tenth believed that they had educationally benefited from being a military

spouse” (Harrell et al., 2004, pp.130-131). Many of the participants who commented on questions correlating the military lifestyle to educational opportunities felt that the frequent relocations and their husband’s unpredictable work schedule contributed to the drawbacks of program enrollment (Harrell et al., 2004). Throughout the case study, statements from individual military spouse interviews were provided; these statements illustrated the challenges associated with living the lifestyle and enrolling in school.

Unfortunately, this population is often overlooked and under-researched. Very little is known about these students and the challenges they may face regarding program enrollment. As part of the analysis of the literature for this study, it is essential to note the lack of information available on military spouse enrollment. The information made readily available to those individuals searching involves the educational benefits that military spouses qualify for and the impact education has on employment marketability. Understanding the resources and jobs available to female military spouses is also crucial for understanding this unique demographic of individuals. Understanding employment may require information about educational enrollment and degree completion. However, there seems to be a significant lack of information regarding the details of female military-spouse enrollment trends. The goal of this research was to shed some light on this area and encourage additional research.

External Stressors Faced by Female Military Spouses

Between the deployments, permanent change of stations (PCS), and inconsistency in a daily routine, several external stressors exist for female military spouses enrolled in some type of degree program. According to Di Nola (2008), there are three significant stressors that impact service members and their families: deployment-related stressors,

emotional stressors, and general-life event stressors. These stressors set female military spouses apart from their civilian counterparts in many ways. In order to understand how external stressors impact female military spouses in pursuit of higher education, each type of stressor must be examined individually. According to Hogancamp and Figley (1983), military spouses play a critical role in the military family structure, and they need to be involved in discussions and conversations associated with military-related stressors.

Deployment Stressors

In 2010, the U.S. Department of Defense stated that over 2.1 million service members had been deployed serving in Operation Enduring Freedom and/or Operation Iraqi Freedom. The year is now 2019, and that number has undoubtedly gone up exponentially. As the number of deployed service members increases, the number of spouses left at home increases. “Spouses of deployed military members face unique challenges, including assuming the role of a single parent and learning new skills, being a sole decision maker, being unable to communicate with a spouse, and fearing for the deployed spouse’s safety” (Skomorovsky, 2014, p. 44). These types of stressors can have both short and long-term effects on spouses and their daily activities. Many spouses may feel challenged when trying to commit their time to a degree or certificate program with their significant other being so far away from home. In addition, being the only parent within a home may make finding time to attend classes more stressful for the spouse.

According to Pincus, House, Chrisensen, and Alder (2017), there are five stages of the deployment cycle as related to human emotions. They hypothesized that the following phases occur when managing an extended deployment (i.e., six months or greater): pre-deployment, deployment, sustainment, re-deployment, and post-deployment.

Through narrative collection, the researchers explored the process of deployment and the impact that it had on military families. “On the home front, significant spousal distress interferes with completing the most basic routines, concentrating on work, and attending to the needs of the children” (Pincus et al., 2017, p. 3). If family members and service members are unable to appropriately navigate the challenges associated with each phase of the deployment cycle, additional struggles may take place. The addition of struggles is especially true for those individuals who have never experienced a long-term deployment cycle. The best way to adequately prepare for the hardships associated with deployment is to prepare for the uncertainties that may lie ahead. Based on the feedback provided in the study, the authors recommend that any marital discourse be settled before the service member leaves, and everyone in the family remains flexible regarding departure and return dates. In addition, when the service member returns from a long-term deployment, there should be a pre-determined expectation that the soldier, spouse, and children grew and changed during the separation. The family unit will need time to adapt and reestablish normalcy (Pincus et al., 2017). Many things can change throughout a deployment, and families may face difficulties when trying to adjust after the separation and should be allowed the opportunity to re-connect without additional stress.

As stated by Pincus et al. (2017), military spousal distress can impact the most basic human functions. If a female military spouse is enrolled in a post-secondary program while also managing the responsibilities associated with being a mother and wife to a deployed service member, there may be a significant increase in her levels of stress. In addition, the stress of deployment does not disappear once the service member returns. The adjustment period of families after a long-term deployment varies for each

family. To understand the unique stressors associated with being a female military spouse, one must recognize the challenges related to the deployment cycle. Institutions of higher education are charged with acknowledging the different life circumstances faced by each student. In relation to higher education, female military spouses may be faced by challenges vastly different than their classmates.

In a study conducted by Rea, Behnke, Huff, and Allen (2015), while analyzing the role of online communication in the lives of the military service members and their families, 10 military spouses were asked to complete semi-structured interviews regarding their experiences during wartime separation. The purpose of the study was to gain insight into the types of online communication used by service members and their spouses during deployment and long-term separations. Through 30- to 60-minute video conferencing interviews, the researchers of the study were able to gain insight into the lives of female military spouses who experience the challenges tied to communicating with deployed service members. The results of the study yielded information regarding the top concerns faced by female military spouses during a deployment. These concerns included the following items: safety of the deployed spouse, monetary and financial supervision, household management and upkeep, as well as feelings of loneliness (Rea et al., 2015). Many of the participants who completed interviews believed that online communication has assisted with the stress associated with deployment, while other participants felt that online communication had made little difference in reducing deployment-related stress. According to the feedback, some military units establish large social media pages that are meant to provide updates and photographs of the day to day happenings overseas. These social media connections allow families to communicate

with their service members on a larger scale, also creating unity and comradery.

However, not all military units create these types of social media pages, which reaffirms the stress and anxiety associated with long-term separation. Rea et al. (2015) felt that their study sheds light on some of the challenges associated with the military lifestyle and how each family experiences deployment in different ways.

With technological advances being made every day, military families are attempting to find ways to reduce the stresses associated with long-term separation. However, as stated by Rea et al. (2015), not all military units have established these common source pages. Female military spouses who are enrolled in a post-secondary program may feel increased uncertainty and worry if they are not receiving consistent updates on their service members, as not every overseas assignment has the same access to communication resources. These feelings may create difficulty when trying to accomplish school-related tasks, in addition to those tasks that must be addressed at home.

Another deployment-related stressor, not often associated with impacting the spouses of deployed service members, is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD took on a new form right around the time of Operation Desert Storm. Researchers began to notice that the side effects of PTSD were not only impacting the soldiers themselves, but also their families. "Exposure to military combat has been linked to post-deployment family functioning impairment. Some studies indicate that symptoms of PTSD significantly account for the relationship between combat exposure and impaired family functioning" (Creech, Benzer, Liebsack, Proctor, & Taft, 2013, p. 507). Paley, Lester, and Mogil (2013) and Paris, DeVoe, Ross, and Acker (2010) indicate that research on the

relationship between PTSD in previously deployed veterans and the effects that the condition has on family members is extremely rare. The U.S. government has made tremendous strides over the years trying to understand the long-term, adverse side effects associated with traumatic war experiences. However, there is still a large group of individuals who have been suffering for years trying to cope with the events that occurred during deployment. One of the most significant obstacles for those families battling PTSD is that not all days are considered bad days. Many individuals experience short episodes of distress brought on by PTSD, while others do not have an occurrence until months after returning from deployment. The onsets and symptoms of PTSD look different in every soldier and within every family. The differing symptoms and varying onset are primary reasons why families struggle with this condition (Matsakis, 2014).

During a study conducted by Chesmore, Piehler, and Gewirtz (2017), 336 military families living in a midwestern state were recruited to examine family intervention practices (as related to PTSD) when one of the parents returned from a deployment. The purpose of the study was to determine how possible indicators of PTSD in (at least) one of the parents impacted the family unit as a whole and what tools may be useful in moderating those effects. The researchers of this study concluded that the effects of PTSD might be detected throughout the family unit, not just in the service member. In addition, the researchers felt that further studies were needed to analyze what moderating tools can be used to eliminate the negative effects (Chesmore et al., 2017). The important thing to remember about PTSD is that its effects go beyond the person with the diagnosis. Continuing to understand this condition through research and outreach will be vital to helping service members and their families over time. Even as wars end, the scars of

posttraumatic stress can still be seen and play a dramatic role in the daily function of many military families.

Zwanzinger, Anderson, Lewis, Ferreir, and Figley (2017) analyzed the impact of PTSD in military service members by gaining feedback from their spouses. During the research, 127 military spouses completed an online survey meant to investigate their resiliency concerning their understanding of PTSD symptoms and resources. According to the study, the number of service members who sought treatment for a PTSD diagnosis was quite low. Without professional help from a mental health facility, PTSD often goes untreated and overlooked. Military spouses often play a key role in identifying and assisting their service members in treating PTSD (Zwanzinger et al., 2017). By using a cross-sectional exploratory research design, the study looked to analyze if military spouses were familiar with the symptoms associated with PTSD and if their knowledge of the condition and access to resources increased their level of resilience. A resiliency measurement survey known as the 10-item Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale was issued after recruiting participants through a social media website (i.e., Facebook). There were 176 participants who completed a section of the survey, but only 127 of those participants were included in the final research sample. Out of the 127 who were used as part of the final sample, 122 indicated that they were female. With only five participants identified as males, they were removed from the study analysis. Based on the results yielded from the surveys, the researchers concluded that female military spouses play a very active role in softening the impacts of war.

Spouses of military service members are in a unique position to become aware of symptoms of PTSD before anyone else, due to the nature of their marital

relationship. Moreover, spouses are more than likely going to be the ones with the ability to encourage a spouse to seek help if and when needed. (Zwanzinger et al., 2017, p. 46)

As female military spouse, identifying PTSD and encouraging treatment can be considered an overlooked deployment-related stressor. For many female military spouses, undergoing this type of stressor is often a rough task, in addition to managing a household and possibly raising children. Attempting to pursue and complete a post-secondary certification or degree program may be difficult with so many additional barriers present. In order to assist these females with these challenges, military and educational communities must recognize these unconventional hardships. Once recognition of the problem has taken place, partnership can be created to gather information and resources needed to assist in these types of situations.

Emotional Stressors

Many spouses of soldiers will explain in detail the challenges associated with staying behind while their loved one deploys. According to Skomorovsky (2014), the challenges faced by military spouses are unique in many ways. In addition to acting as a single-parent and sole decision-maker for the family, learning new skills and fearing for the safety of a loved one are just two challenges brought on by deployment. During times of stress for those individuals living in the civilian (or non-military) world, many will find comfort in friends, family, and familiar situations. Unfortunately, many military families are not fortunate enough to have those securities nearby. Being stationed at different posts around the world often leaves military families without a familiar sanctuary for retreating. These circumstances often lead to the abuse of drugs and

alcohol. A recent study completed by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2016) concluded that military wives are more likely than their civilian peers to abuse prescription medications meant to treat conditions like anxiety and depression. In addition, these same females are also more likely to consume liquor in excess and “binge drink” (Prine, 2018). Many believe that these behaviors are happening because military life has started to see a younger demographic of married couples. However, the most supported idea is that military spouses are experiencing a higher rate of stress and mental illness due to the conditions brought on by the military lifestyle (Erbes, Kramer, Arbisi, DeGarmo, & Polusny, 2017).

In a case study conducted by Potter and Enoch (2017), military spouses have reported a higher rate of depression, anxiety, and sleep disorders compared to their civilian counterparts. According to the case study, these emotional stressors come from a variety of sources, including added responsibilities associated with long-term separation and the constant worry that loved ones are in danger. The purpose of the case study was to recognize the challenges associated with military-related emotional stressors and identify areas where efforts are being made to increase awareness and prevention measures. For example, in the case study, Potter and Enoch mention an initiative referred to as “Blue Star Card Programs”, or resiliency programs. These types of programs aim to find supportive resources and activities that are designed to have a positive impact on the military spouse, who may be separated from their loved ones. In one example, Fort Riley’s Morale, Welfare, and Recreation Department partnered with Kansas State University to raise funds for military spouses interested in participating in the services offered through these programs. Examples of these services include in-class art/craft

instruction and outdoor recreation activities. In order to combat many of the emotional stressors faced by female military spouses, this type of initiative is essential.

The partnership that was created between Fort Riley's Morale, Welfare, and Recreation Department and Kansas State University is a perfect example of how institutions of higher education have the opportunity to learn about military spouses and the unique barriers they face. Potter and Enoch (2017) reported that the response from the programs using participant surveys yielded positive results. The military spouse resiliency score increased by approximately 5.2 points, after completing the scheduled activities. By conducting these types of studies and speaking with female military spouses about the resources they need in order to be successful, partnerships and services can be created that may allow for positive changes to take place.

Another study conducted by Leroux, Kum, Dabney, and Wells (2016) acknowledges the lack of information on female military spouses' mental health since the Global War on Terror began in 2001. Through investigating mental health benefits utilization of military spouses over a specific timeframe, the researchers were able to gain some understanding of an area often overlooked. As stated by Leroux et al., although military spouses are not typically the ones who are sent to combat zones or kept away from their families for long periods, their situations are no less tasking than the situations of their active-duty counterparts. In the study, the researchers took a longitudinal approach and analyzed military spouse insurance claims (related to mental health) over a 36-month span on time (between 2011 to 2014). The sample consisted of 2,530 military spouses whose service member was assigned to one of 10 active Navy aircraft carriers. The research monitored the spouses over 36 months, also accounting for periods of pre-

deployment, active deployment, and post-deployment. The results of the study highlighted the unique weight military spouses face during their service members' career, specifically related to emotional and mental health.

The reality of the military family life is not always well-known to those individuals who have never experienced it. Some may associate emotional stress with those individuals who are actively engaging in an overseas combat zone. However, as clearly stated by Leroux et al. (2016), the burden of the military lifestyle is just as complicated for those individuals who are left at home. Emotional welfare plays a role in the daily functioning of service members and their families. Over the years, higher education professionals have learned that maintaining emotional balance is crucial for students looking to be successful in their academic careers. This reality is also true for female military spouses facing their unique set of emotional stressors. If institutions can acknowledge and address the unique emotional stressors of female military spouses, these individuals' chances of degree attainment may increase.

General Life-Event Stressors

Many have heard the saying, "What can go wrong, will go wrong." This statement seems to be especially true for military families. A service member will leave for a temporary duty assignment (also known in the military community as temporary duty or going TDY) and the very next day the car battery will die, and the entire family will be plagued with the stomach bug. These situations are the types of general life-event stressors that impact female military spouses the most. Military service members are very rarely stationed near their extended families. This type of isolation can have many adverse effects on the running of a military household. There will not always be someone

around to help with the household when illness strikes or when the car breaks down. These stressors can play a significant role in military spouse education and employment. Many may find it hard to juggle a family and a degree program.

Feeling that you have a lack of social support either physically near you, or someone who can listen to your current struggles, can contribute to feelings of isolation. Research shows that when someone perceives that they have limited support in times of stress, their self-reported, overall sense of well-being declines. (Woodworth, 2015, p. 54)

Finances also play an important role in general life stressors experienced by military spouses. Service members often go without phone or internet access for weeks; this lack of access can make managing a household budget difficult. Military spouses often become solely responsible for the family expenses and certain major decisions that accompany it.

A brief study conducted by Rodriguez and Margolin (2015) created a timeline of data collection in order to analyze how the absence of the military service member within a family unit impacted the overall mental well-being of the family at home. The study assessed 70 mother-child dyads, collected from families living throughout southern California. The researchers used the following measures to investigate the impact of military service member absence on the family unit: number of recent deployments, service members' cumulative time away from the family, the amount of family events missed by the service member, the frequency at which the service member contacted their family, the internalizing symptoms of children, and the internalizing symptoms of

mothers. This study concluded that the frequent absence of the military service member resulted in increased anxiety and depression in mothers and children.

Notably, the mere frequency of departures and the passage of time do not speak to the fabric of families' lives during absence, nor do these dimensions describe the impact of the service member's absence from that shared life. For families who experience major life stressors or transitions (e.g., death of a relative, job loss, financial struggles, residual moves) during absences, the service member's instrumental and emotional support will likely be deeply missed as family members attempt to cope. (Rodriguez & Margolin, 2015, p. 642)

These types of general life stressors add a new viewpoint when looked at from the perspective of female military spouses and education. Each household faces unique challenges that many from the outside world do not understand. Research has indicated that female military spouses have a strong desire to complete post-secondary education; however, there may be general-life stressors that may be influencing the opportunity to complete post-secondary education.

Summary

The circumstances and challenges associated with female military spouses in higher education can be considered unique and unfamiliar to those individuals who are not actively engaged in the military lifestyle. Throughout his research, Tinto (2017) often poses questions as to what institutions of higher education can do to improve student retention. As related to the theoretical framework mentioned in Chapter I, ideas of retention theory, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging may all play an active role in keeping students enrolled in college. However, gathering basic knowledge of unfamiliar

or unknown populations of students is also crucial to understanding student retention. By identifying some of the distinctive challenges or barriers associated with these populations, information may be sent to educators and policymakers on crucial steps needed to ensure these students are being supported through their post-secondary journey. With such a lack of research currently available on the subject of female military spouses in higher education, any effort to expand current research should be supported.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research study was to identify and analyze the external barriers faced by military spouses when pursuing higher education. By conducting this research, the goal was to determine if the military lifestyle has impacted the educational experiences of female military spouses and what perceptions these spouses have on how the lifestyle has shaped their access to education. As outlined in Chapter II, the focus of higher education in relation to the military community has historically been directed to service members and war-returning veterans (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). The lack of research surrounding military spouses has become increasingly evident over the years. Because military spouses make up a significant portion of the military community, research is crucial in order to gain perspective into the unique circumstances of this population. This chapter will include the following sections: research design, the role of the researcher, participants, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, and a summary.

Research Design

In order to gain detailed information about the educational experiences of female military spouses, a narrative approach in qualitative research was utilized in the form of individual participant interviews. A qualitative study was considered to be the most appropriate form of methodology in order for each participant to have the opportunity to describe her personal experiences to the researcher. Personal experiences may provide

additional details that may not be available through any other method of study. The purpose of the study was to collect those personal experiences and organize them in a manner that allowed for analysis and interpretation. According to Merriam (2009), “Basically, qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 13). Although other research designs would have yielded valuable information, individual stories given by each participant allowed for more thoughtful consideration. The study aimed to focus on the words being said during each interview and the meaning behind them.

During the study’s initial design, the choice had to be made whether to approach the research from a narrative or phenomenological stance. Narrative and phenomenological analyses are closely related in a variety of ways, and each analysis allows for a different perspective on qualitative research (Keegan, 2009). The phenomenological analysis aims at describing lived experiences of a given phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990), while narrative analysis uses stories (i.e., narratives) to explain the happenings of the world (Merriam, 2009). Both approaches are essential when attempting to uncover information within qualitative analysis. Because the study explored how female military spouses experience higher education, a narrative approach seemed the most appropriate form of analysis. Each participant was allowed the opportunity to use her personal narrative to describe her thoughts on the external barriers faced by female military spouses in pursuit of higher education. In the future, other forms of qualitative research should be used to gain further information on this subject.

Role of the Researcher

For this study, the researcher's responsibilities included the development of the study, the data collection procedures, as well as the final analysis and conclusion of the study's results. However, the researcher felt a personal connection to this topic and felt the need to explore it in further detail. As a female military spouse who has been involved in the world of higher education for over 10 years, the researcher was interested in exploring the stories of other female military spouses and their experiences in higher education. Over the last 10 years, the researcher has completed several degrees while being married to an active duty service member in the U.S. Army. Although the researcher has encountered a variety of unique experiences while pursuing advanced degrees, she was interested in gaining the perspectives of other female military spouses. The researcher felt that this topic was especially important due to the lack of current information regarding female military spouses in higher education. In order to minimize bias and increase objectivity, the researcher followed scripted verbiage when conducting each interview. The researcher also chose not to recruit any personal friends or acquaintances within the sample. Each participant was provided the same general information on the study and asked the same questions during the recorded interview.

Participants

The following section will outline the participant selection for this study and provide a detailed account of how the researcher chose those individuals who qualified to participate in the study. By outlining population and setting, as well as sample criteria, a better understanding of the participants may be developed.

Population and Setting

The interviews were conducted over the telephone between the researcher and the participants. This interview method allowed the participant to contribute to the interview at a time and location that was convenient for her. The participants were recruited through social media military spouse support groups found on Facebook and screened for qualifying and disqualifying criteria. The qualifying criteria were (a) the participant had to have been female, (b) legally married to an active duty service member (any branch), and (c) enrolled in any college program (either traditional or online). The exclusionary criteria for this study included (a) non-female military spouse, (b) individuals who were not married to an active duty service member, and (c) spouses who were not enrolled in some form of a college program. Screenings took place via email between the potential participant and the researcher (see Appendix A for Participation Confirmation Email). The posts were placed in the following two Facebook pages: “Military Spouses with Advanced Degrees” and “Military Spouse.” A social media discussion post was placed on each group’s page, requesting participants and listing the contact information for the researcher. The recruitment post was placed on only military spouse support group pages, as the content on those pages is directed specifically toward military spouses. The recruitment notification was not posted on the researcher’s personal social media pages, nor distributed within the researcher’s local military spouse support groups. Because the researcher had witnessed high activity amongst those members of the social media support groups, it was believed that the response rate towards the study would be positive. The researcher felt that a public announcement on social media was inappropriate, as it may have attracted those individuals who did not meet the qualifying

criteria for the study. In addition, the researcher was looking to gain information from female military spouses whom she did not know personally before the recruitment post.

Sample

The population for this study was composed of female military spouses of active duty service members from any military branch. The researcher was able to select qualifying participants using purposeful sampling, based on the qualities they possess. According to Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016), “Simply put, the researcher decides what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience” (p. 2). In addition to being female, the participants had to be at least 18 years of age to qualify for the study and legally married to an active duty member of the U.S. armed forces (any branch). In addition, the participants had to be enrolled in a (part-time or full-time) post-secondary education program (online or traditional) of any level (e.g., certificate program, associate degree, or bachelor’s degree). The study did not require the participants to live in a particular area of the country or specify if their program was through a public or private institution. The ideal sample size for the study was between four and eight participants, or until saturation occurred. Because the study was utilizing 30- to 60-minute semi-structured interviews to collect the data, the researcher wanted to make sure the sample size was small so that an in-depth analysis of the interview transcripts could take place.

Instrumentation

The instrumentation section of this study will outline the method of data collection used by the researcher. The participants of the study completed semi-structured

interviews with the researcher and transcripts of the interviews created. A discussion of the validity and reliability of the study will also be outlined in this section.

Interviews

DeMarrais (2004) outlined the importance of collecting data through interviews; she specified the process as the verbal engagement between the researcher and the participant where focused questions are asked in relation to a research study. Because a narrative analysis was chosen for this study to tell the stories of the participants, individual interviews seemed like the most appropriate way to gather information for further analysis. When behavior cannot be observed and past events cannot be replicated, interviews allow participants the opportunity to explain their experiences and interpretations of the world around them. There are three types of interviews used in the qualitative analysis: highly structured/standardized interviews, semi-structured interviews, and unstructured/informal interviews (Merriam, 2009). Each type of interview is designed to uncover valuable information within a research study. For the purpose of this study, the researcher chose to use semi-structured interviews to gain insight into the personal experiences of each participant. During a semi-structured interview, the researcher can ask more open-ended questions to the participants and respond more freely based on the answers provided (Merriam, 2009).

The researcher prepared a list of questions for each interview (see Appendix E), based on the study's established research questions. Each participant was asked the same questions during her 30- to 60-minute interview; however, the researcher was able to alter her responses based on the answers provided. The purpose of using semi-structured interview questions was to allow each participant the freedom to tell her personal story

and feel comfortable discussing sensitive information with the researcher. The established interview questions also eliminated potential inconsistencies between the researcher and the participants. All of the participants were asked the same questions and treated similarly in their interactions with the researcher. Each interview was recorded using an audio recording device in order to capture the participants' interview responses accurately.

Validity and Reliability

Definitions vary when analyzing validity and reliability in qualitative research. Historically, the purpose of establishing validity and reliability in quantitative research was to document a study's ability to measure data appropriately and create standardized operating procedures (Merriam, 2009). When a study can accurately measure what it was intended to measure, while also providing steps for duplicate research, the study has achieved validity and reliability (Golafshani, 2003). In qualitative research, determining the validity and reliability of a study is a little different in comparison to quantitative research. Because the data assembled from qualitative studies are often collected through observations, stories, or other forms of personal communication (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), examining the study's measurement procedures is crucial. According to Leung (2015), validity in qualitative research is determined by the appropriate use of tools and data collection procedures during a study. The validity determination can also help determine the appropriateness of the study's overall methodology. In addition, reliability in qualitative research relies on a study's perceived quality and consistency. Golafshani (2003) explained that "reliability and validity are conceptualized as trustworthiness, rigor, and quality in qualitative paradigm" (p. 604).

The researcher considered validity and reliability before choosing the method of data collection. Because the study aimed to collect personal stories of the participants, choosing semi-structured interviews for data collection seemed like the most appropriate method. Using personal interviews as the primary tool for data collection achieved the study's goal of documenting the narratives of female military spouses in higher education and the potential barriers they may face during their journey. From the perspective of the researcher, the use of interviews was the most appropriate form of data collection. To ensure reliability during the study, the researcher outlined the study's protocol systematically before collecting the data. In order to minimize bias and increase objectivity, the researcher used a scripted pre-interview checklist and pre-approved interview questions with each participant. By creating and documenting an organized process, the researcher was able to outline the specifics of the study for future replication.

Data Collection

Once the selection of participants was complete, the researcher sent the Letter to Prospective Participant (Appendix B) and the Participant Confirmation Email (Appendix C) to each individual. They were given 48 hours to complete the forms and return them to the researcher so that interviews could be scheduled in a timely manner. The Letter to the Prospective Participant provided the study's overall purpose and briefly outlined the researcher's history with the topic. As soon as the required documents were returned, the researcher sent a confirmation email with the date and time of the interview (see Appendix C for Participation Confirmation Email).

Based on the three primary research questions, the interview protocol was developed. Each question was designed to create an open dialogue between the

participant and the researcher. The dialogue would lead to personal stories and testimonies surrounding the experiences that each female military spouse faced while pursuing higher education. The details of their encounters with frequent relocations, military-related education benefits, and managing the school-homelife balance provided insight into their unique lifestyle. The participants were given the freedom, within the 30- to 60-minute time constraint, to speak about openly about their lives in the military and encouraged to use examples related to the specific interview question. These examples provided additional context for the researcher and assisted in answering the study's research sub-questions. If a detail or statement needed clarification, the semi-structured interview allowed the researcher the ability to ask follow-up questions. Each interview question was designed to uncover the experiences of female military spouses within higher education.

Once the interviews were completed, a follow-up email was sent to each participant (see Appendix G for Participant Interview Follow-Up) thanking them for their time and willingness to assist in the study. In addition, the email also listed information regarding transcript verification and confidentiality reminders. The researcher's contact information was provided, and each participant was encouraged to reach out with any questions or concerns.

Data Analysis

The manner of analyzing data is a multi-step process, where the researcher must take the information provided during the data collection phase and make sense of it. This process involves condensing, merging, and interpreting what participants have said, in order to create meaning (Merriam, 2009). For this study, data analysis occurred in the

following steps: transcription of each recorded interview, participant confirmation of their transcript, and coding of the transcripts based on themes and sub-themes. These data were analyzed in order to answer the following qualitative research questions:

- For female military spouses, how has the military lifestyle impacted their educational experience?
- What perceptions do female military spouses have on how the military lifestyle has shaped their access and retention ability in their educational program?
- What are the personal experiences of female military spouses regarding the barriers or challenges of pursuing a college degree?

In addition, the data were also analyzed to answer the following sub-questions:

- Based on personal experience, what are some of the programs or resources believed to be missing from institutions, specifically regarding support services for military spouses?
- How can the U.S. military better assist female military spouses in their educational pursuits?

The research questions remained at the forefront of the study, especially when collecting and analyzing the data.

After each interview was recorded, the audio was uploaded to the automated speech to text transcription website called Rev.com. The transcription software is well-known among the research community and uses software to transcribe audio files. Human transcribers are not used during this process, ensuring participant confidentiality. Once the transcription software produced the finished transcript, the researcher listened to

the audio recordings and compared the recordings to the transcripts. The transcripts were sent to each participant for content validation and adjustments were made upon request. Once all the transcripts had been confirmed, the researcher uploaded each transcript into a coding software program called Nvivo12 (QSR International, 2019). The program examined the transcripts, categorized words and sentences, and highlighted reoccurring verbiage throughout the interviews. In addition, the researcher also hand-coded each transcript using the frequency of words used throughout the interviews. Based on the information provided by the software and the notes collected during the hand-coding process, the researcher was able to document themes and sub-themes for further analysis. Through the use of narrative research, the stories of each participant were retold and dissected for further interpretation. The interpretation of the stories provides the raw data for researchers and paints a broader picture of the study (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007).

Summary

The outlined study used a narrative approach to qualitative analysis through the use of semi-structured interviews with the intent of discovering the external barriers faced by female military spouses in pursuit of higher education. The narrative approach was used so that each participant was allowed the opportunity to tell her personal story through each interview question. These stories illustrated the personal feelings and attitudes felt by the participants during their experiences. Through the use of audio recording and transcription, the commonalities and differences amongst the participants were documented for further research. Identifying and analyzing the themes discovered throughout the interviews will further the understanding of this topic in higher education.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The following chapter provides the results gathered from the interviews completed by seven female military spouses who are currently enrolled in a post-secondary degree program. The purpose of this study was to explore the external barriers faced by female military spouses who are pursuing higher education and gain first-hand knowledge on the subject. Information on female military spouses in higher education continues to be scarce. Over the last several decades, research has primarily focused on military service members and war-returning veterans, rather than their spouses. Although gathering information on military veterans in higher education continues to be a crucial area of research, many have continuously overlooked the females who also make up a large portion of the military community. Understanding the unique circumstances surrounding female military spouses in higher education will not only shed light on this special group of students but also assist higher education administrators who are responsible for making informed decisions about policy and change within their institutions.

Chapter IV will be separated into the following areas: participants, findings, and final summary. Each section of the chapter will detail the information collected during the interviews and how it is related to the purpose of the study. This chapter will also analyze the themes and sub-themes collected from the interview transcripts and how these topics relate to the overall research questions.

Participants

Over two weeks in November 2019, recruitment posts were placed on two military spouse-affiliated Facebook pages asking for volunteers to participate in telephone interviews on the topic of female military spouses in higher education. Those participants interested in the study were asked to contact the researcher using email or Facebook Messenger. Facebook Messenger is a private messaging system used by members of Facebook to communicate. Informed consent forms were collected from seven participants and telephone interviews were scheduled during a time and date that was convenient for each individual. For 30-to 60-minutes, 13 semi-structured interview questions were asked of each participant. They were encouraged to share their personal experiences with the researcher and describe their encounters in a detailed manner. The seven female participants fell between 26 and 46 years old and were currently enrolled in either a bachelor's, master's, or doctoral program. Six of the seven participants reported having children, and all of them stated that they lived within the United States. Each participant chose their pseudonym, and any reference to their real name was erased from the record. After each interview was completed, the audio file was transcribed using a transcription software service and sent to each participant for review. Participants had the opportunity to make changes to the interview transcript to clarify the information provided during the interview. The researcher confirmed the edits, and the final transcript was agreed upon by each participant. Table 1 presents a brief introduction of the seven participants who completed interviews for the study.

Table 1

Participant Information

Participant	Gender	Age Range	Program Level	Military Branch Affiliation
Michelle	Female	20s	Doctoral	Army
Elizabeth	Female	40s	Master's	Air Force
Paige	Female	20s	Master's	Army
Leigh	Female	20s	Master's	Marine Corps
Laura	Female	30s	Bachelor's	Army
Danielle	Female	40s	Master's	National Guard
Meg	Female	30s	Doctoral	Coast Guard

Michelle

Michelle is a 27-year-old female military spouse currently living in Hawaii with her husband and son. She is the child of two military parents, and her husband is currently serving as an active duty service member in the U.S. Army. Michelle is a doctoral student in the clinical psychology program at the Hawaii School of Professional Psychology and attends full-time traditional, face-to-face classes. She is currently in her third year of the program and predicts that the program will take her five years to complete. Although she has only been a female military spouse for five years, she has lived in Texas, Washington, Colorado, and Hawaii.

When asked if the military lifestyle has impacted her ability to matriculate better in her current degree program, Michelle stated, "It has been difficult to attend face-to-face classes while managing the relocations to other military installations. A few years ago, I had to take a year off of school because my husband received orders to a different duty station." She continued by stating that this program has been very difficult to

complete compared to her master's program. Michelle explained that she was enrolled in a fully online program for her master's degree, which made the military relocations a little less stressful. However, after completing that degree, she quickly learned that traditional in-person classes were the best fit for her. Unfortunately, navigating programs in relation to military installations has been a challenge. When the researcher asked Michelle to expand on her experiences, she said the following:

It has been very difficult trying to manage where my husband is stationed and what colleges are near his military installation. I actually remember when I was looking at schools, I had pulled up a list of bases and then transferred those to an excel spreadsheet. I had listed military bases on one side of the spreadsheet and then listed graduate programs within a 40 miles radius of those bases on the other side. The schools that made the list were the only ones that I applied to.

Although Michelle believes that she will be able to complete her program without taking any additional time off, she may have to make a tough decision if the Army decides to move her family to another duty station. "If the Army decides to move us again, I will have to choose between finishing my program as a single parent or starting the process all over again."

Elizabeth

Elizabeth is a 46-year-old female military spouse whose husband has been in the U.S. Air Force since 1991. They have four adult children who are currently enrolled in various colleges across the country. Although Elizabeth and her family have moved throughout the country over the last 28 years, they have lived in California, Colorado, Washington, D.C., and Alabama on multiple occasions. Elizabeth is currently pursuing

her master's degree in clinical mental health counseling through Antioch University's fully online program. She is actively completing her program's required internship and anticipates that she will graduate in December 2020. This master's degree is the second graduate degree for Elizabeth; she previously went to school for her master's degree in business administration and was working in organizational development until two years ago.

During the interview, Elizabeth was asked about the most significant challenges she faced regarding living the military lifestyle and completing a college program. Elizabeth shared that she thought her circumstances would become easier as an empty nester. However, she has found the challenges associated with being a military spouse enrolled in a college program have just evolved as her children have left home.

As you know, we move probably every two years. When I was looking for a program, I had to pick one that I could do from anywhere. That's why I chose the program through Antioch University. Pursuing a college education given my husband's career choice has been tricky. Mental health counseling has always been my passion, but I originally chose the business degree because I knew it would be more portable. Now that my husband is approaching retirement, he really encouraged me to do something that I really enjoy doing.

Elizabeth believes that she has found a program that is right for her, given her current circumstances. She anticipates that the most difficult challenge ahead of her will be associated with certifications and licensures. "Currently I'm scheduled to graduate in December of 2020. If we have to move again before my husband retires, I will have to work on licensing in whichever state we are in. I'll just have to figure it out."

Paige

Paige is a 26-year-old female military spouse who just celebrated her second wedding anniversary with her husband, who has served in the U.S. Army for two years. They have no children and are currently stationed in Fort Polk, Louisiana. This assignment is the first duty station for Paige and her husband, as he recently graduated from training in Fort Benning, Georgia. She is currently enrolled in the University of Tennessee-Knoxville's Master of Social Work program, which is fully online.

I had no choice but to do an online program because usually graduate schools are not good at transferring credits. If I wanted to go to an actual campus, the closest would probably be Louisiana State University and that is quite a drive. I love campus schools and switching to fully online has been difficult.

Paige chose to pursue an online program because she knew her husband is in the early part of his career and moving would be inevitable. She even had to push up her program's internship requirement in anticipation of an upcoming PCS.

I had to rearrange the program in order to be able to complete it within two years.

I was supposed to do my second internship right now, but because we are moving soon, it was going to delay my graduation by a semester. I had to make up close to 800 hours over the summer. In addition, I was also working 70 hours a week.

We had to make a lot of adjustments since we knew the move was going to be coming down the pipeline.

Paige anticipates that completing this degree will not be the end of her educational journey. Due to the challenges associated with the licensures needed to be a social worker and the constant changes related to living the military life, she states that she will

probably look at completing one of the MyCAA certificates programs. “My husband is still within the rank requirements for the MyCAA scholarship, so I guess I was planning on getting an extra certificate given the job market and the difficulties transferring licenses between states.”

Leigh

Leigh is a 26-year-old female military spouse whose husband has been in the U.S. Marine Corps for five years. The two of them share one child, who was born shortly after they got married. During the interview, Leigh stated that she feels very fortunate because her family has only been stationed at Fort Dix in New Jersey and she has not experienced the difficulties of relocating. She is currently enrolled full-time in Arizona State University’s Master of Public Service and Public Policy program, emphasizing in Emergency Management and Homeland Security. Leigh is finishing her second full semester in the program and is on track to graduate from the program in January 2021.

When asked about the most significant challenges associated with living the military lifestyle and completing a college program, Leigh stated that she believes she has been impacted on multiple levels. Not only has she experienced challenges with schoolwork and finding her social circle, she has also faced difficulties with her husband being absent for a large part of their marriage.

I feel like when you are dating a civilian unless they have a job that requires them to travel a lot, they are pretty much at home. For the entirety of our marriage, I have had to get used to him being away. Sometimes it is for one month and then sometimes it is for six months. Finding ways to function with schoolwork and our

child is one thing, but I miss having my person around. Struggling socially can impact your ability to perform well in school.

Although Leigh does not believe that her husband's career in the military has impacted her ability to pursue a college degree program, it certainly has not made the process easier. Leigh explained that applying for the program has not been difficult part; it has been the day to day operations. "Every day requires planning. I have to make sure everyone in my household is in good physical and emotional health."

Laura

Laura is a 37-year-old military spouse with three children (i.e., two girls and one boy). Her husband has been in the U.S. Army for 20 years, and they are currently stationed at Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland. Throughout her husband's military career, Laura and her family have been stationed at the following installations; Fort Benning, Georgia, Fort Riley, Kansas, and Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland. After completing her associate degree in Fort Riley, Kansas, Laura decided she wanted to continue her studies and finish her bachelor's degree in general studies, with a focus on business administration. As a former active duty service member, she was able to provide a new perspective on the topics discussed during the interview. Although Laura is currently enrolled in a fully online program through Southern Hampshire University and enjoys the convenience of taking online classes, Laura states that she misses the traditional classes offered through the institution on Fort Riley. "I really feel like my previous institution did an outstanding job of assisting female military spouses who were looking to enroll in school. The institution offered free tuition and continuous enrollment, which made it easy to get started."

When asked to discuss the challenges associated with living the military lifestyle and completing a college degree, Laura stated that managing life at home has been the largest hardship.

My husband's continuous deployments have been the biggest struggle for me. It feels like I am a single mom most of the time. Since I care for three kids every day, it has been difficult attending to their needs while trying to complete my schoolwork. Some days it feels like I have to choose between spending time with my kids or doing my homework. When my kids were really young, I chose to make them the priority. But now that they are a little bit older, I have decided to make my education a priority, too. However, it is very difficult to take care of everything when my husband is deployed for long periods of time.

With graduation approaching in May 2020, Laura is hoping to contribute to her family's financial stability going forward. She believes that having a degree offers more opportunities for her family after her husband retires from the military. "I have been a stay-at-home mom for so long that after he retires, I want to get my career going and contribute to our family's financial health."

Danielle

Danielle is a 41-year-old female military spouse whose husband has served in the U.S. Army and National Guard over the last 18 years. Danielle and her husband share two children; a boy who is 18 years old and a girl who is 16 years old. Over the last two decades, their family has been stationed all over the world, including Texas, California, Korea, Maryland, and Arizona. She is currently working on her master's degree in nursing, with an emphasis in public health through Grand Canyon University online.

Because this degree is the third one for Danielle (she also has an associate's and bachelor's degree), she is very familiar with the military lifestyle while being a full-time student. "I would prefer a brick and mortar educational experience but knowing that I would just have to pick up and move makes that difficult. The online program is the easiest way to accommodate our current life situation."

During her interview, Danielle stated that the military had provided her both educational opportunities and challenges over the years. She was fortunate enough to receive some of her husband's Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, which have assisted in covering the financial costs associated with her degree. In addition, Grand Canyon University offers discounted tuition rates for military service members and their families. These services have relieved some of the burdens that many people face during their educational journey. However, when asked about how the military has impacted her ability to enroll and better matriculate in her current college program, Danielle said the following:

It has been really difficult. You know, everyone has their own unique path, especially in the military. I do not know if there is any good time to go back to school, but it has been very challenging for us. There was a time when my husband was stationed in Northern California and my kids and I were living in Southern California. I was working on this degree at that time, and it was incredibly hard without his support. I know that everybody experiences tough situations. However, it has been extremely rough on an emotional level when we are separated for so long and then try to come back together and function as a family. That has been tough for me as a person, as a mother, and as a student.

Moving forward, Danielle is looking forward to graduating in the spring semester of 2020 and finding her place within the nursing community. She expects that if her family continues to move, there will be obstacles finding employment within her field, but she is currently looking to focus completing her degree and creating connections within the nursing community.

Meg

As a former active duty service member in the U.S. military, Meg can speak from her experiences in a variety of ways. Meg and her husband met while serving in the Coast Guard and traveled the world together as a dual-military family. While stationed in Connecticut, Meg left the service and had their first child. Over the next few years, they would continue their travels and add three more children to their family. Currently stationed just outside of Washington, D.C., Meg recently began her doctoral degree in human organization and learning at George Washington University. The program offers traditional classes that take place on one Friday and Saturday out of every month. When discussing the experiences of female military spouses in higher education, Meg was able to provide a unique perspective on the subject.

The sacrifices our service members make should never be discounted. But I tell my husband this all of the time; I have seen both sides of the spectrum. It has been much harder to be a military spouse than to be an active duty service member. As a service member, when you move from one place to another, you are automatically plugged into a unit. You have people that you go to with questions and a chain of command to answer to. But when you are a military spouse, there is not that set up support system. We are responsible for figuring out our own way

and finding things that work for us. Not all college programs understand our experiences and what we are going through.

Although Meg just started her program in Fall 2019, she may be looking for other alternatives very soon. As a former service member, Meg's Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits will be expiring soon. This impending expiration means that if she does not stay in school, she may lose her educational benefits through the military. However, her family is also scheduled to make an overseas move in the next six months. As someone who prefers in-person classes to online classes, she may be faced with a difficult decision. "The plan was to stay in Washington, D.C. for a long time. But after this semester, I may have to pause this program and take some classes at a local community college until we know where we are moving. It seems like every time I have a plan to start a program, something changes."

Findings

In order to answer the research questions outlined at the beginning of the study, the transcripts were coded using reoccurring themes and subthemes. The initial research questions for the study are as follows:

- For female military spouses, how has the military lifestyle impacted their educational experience?
- What perceptions do female military spouses have on how the military lifestyle has shaped their access and retention ability in their educational program?
- What are the personal experiences of female military spouses, regarding the barriers or challenges of pursuing a college degree?

The following sub-questions have been included to provide additional information on the subject:

- Based on personal experience, what are some of the programs or resources believed to be missing from institutions, specifically regarding support services for military spouses?
- How can the U.S. military better assist female military spouses in their educational pursuits?

By identifying the themes and sub-themes found in each interview transcript, a thorough analysis was conducted on the personal experiences of the seven female military spouses who participated in the study. The themes found through the data collection process were geographic stability, program accessibility, institutional knowledge and support, and community support and assistance. These reoccurring themes were able to illustrate the commonalities between the participants and shed light on female military spouses in higher education.

Geographic Stability

The most prominent theme discovered during the telephone interviews with the participants was geographic stability. As stated by Olszak (2017), one of the most challenging obstacles faced by military spouses is the constant relocations and the difficulties associated with living in remote areas around the world. According to all seven military spouses interviewed for this study, geographic stability has been one of the top significant barriers they have faced during their educational process. Even for those participants who had only moved once or twice throughout their husband's career in the military, geographic access to education and additional support services has been a

problem. For Michelle and many other female military spouses like her, the choice of where to go to school depends on the location of their husbands. Michelle stated, “Knowing where my husband is going will always take priority. That will tell me where I can live and what schools I can attend.”

Additionally, Laura said, “Our current duty station is very small and does not offer many options in terms of educational resources. Each duty station is different, and that can often be challenging when you are trying to start or finish a college degree.” Overseas relocations also add an additional complication for those individuals who are looking to complete their college degrees. For example, Meg was initially told that her husband might be relocated very soon but somewhere on the east coast (as the Coast Guard does not usually relocate overseas). As a student enrolled in a traditional program through George Washington University, she planned on just flying into Washington, D.C. once a month to continue her program. However, Meg recently discovered that the U.S. military might have other plans for her family. She stated the following:

Now my husband is hearing that our next duty station will be in either Germany or Hawaii. I have waited so long to enroll in a program, and it looks like I might not be able to complete it. Because you know, I cannot just fly in for a weekend from Hawaii and Germany once a month.

Due to the constant changes with geographic stability, many of the participants felt that they had no choice but to enroll in an online degree program. Paige explained, I love campus schools and switching completely online has been very difficult for me. But with the chance that the military will move us at any time, an online program was my only choice. Oh my gosh, I really miss interacting with people!

Even some fully online degree programs require some in-class activity or internship time. Danielle described her experience with being enrolled in an online program but being geographically unable to complete some of the additional requirements required by her degree program. She said, “My frustration has come from my institution not helping me with my practicum requirements. All of their practicum contacts for my specialty are nowhere near my location. I had to delay my education until I could find one.”

Although many of the experiences with geographic stability have been difficult for the participants, Elizabeth shared a positive experience with her professors at Antioch University.

I specifically chose this institution because I had heard it was so military friendly.

We moved once mid-semester, and it was really difficult for me. However, the school was incredibly supportive administratively, and my professors really tried to understand my situation. They told me to just keep them updated and take my time getting settled into our new location.

Each participant shared a variety of experiences that allowed the researcher the opportunity to gain additional information about this reoccurring theme. Geographic stability within the military community seems to be an important concern for those female military spouses pursuing degrees in higher education.

Program Accessibility

The importance of program accessibility was another reoccurring theme among all seven of the participants. Five of the participants interviewed for this study emphasized the importance of enrolling in online programs in order to be successful. They spoke about their search for online programs in their degree field and how classes

were easily accessible no matter where they were. Elizabeth noted that she was intentional about choosing an online program that was available to her at any time but also made her professors and classmates reachable through video conferencing. She said the following:

While I was in my traditional MBA program, I could not tell you the name of one professor or anyone that I went to school with. And I was in class with them every week. But this program's online accessibility has made a huge difference in connecting with faculty members and classmates. Mental health counseling is very intense, so it has been nice to have that type of support from others in the program.

Paige emphasized the importance of choosing an online program due to the constant uncertainty of her family's schedule. She shared, "Whether it is training, PCSing, or a deployment...sometimes these things are last minute. With the ability to do everything online, I do not have to worry as much about those sudden events interrupting school."

Another critical factor with program accessibility that was mentioned by the participants was the need for saving time. Managing time for the participants was mentioned multiple times throughout the interviews. Leigh described her struggles when she was trying to collect information on local universities at the on-post educational support center.

When we went there, we did not know what was going on because the entire building was under construction. After we finally found the support center, no one there seemed to have the answers to my questions and told me that I needed to come back. Honestly, I just gave up because I did not have the time to keep going

back. With my husband constantly gone and having to take care of my child, I did not have the time in my day to spare. Finally, I just went home and started researching online schools and looking at their ratings.

Laura recounted her previous experiences at Fort Riley and how their college programs were designed to save military spouses time. She stated that Fort Riley was really great about publicizing their continuous admission and six-week class cycles. “As a military spouse with a family, time is hard to come by. But the college on Fort Riley sent the message that no matter what your schedule was like or when you wanted to start, the opportunity was there.” Laura is disappointed that her current online degree program does not offer those types of enrollment perks. She continued, “Through our current military installation, people may be enrolling, but you just do not hear about it. There are no details. It just is not accessible. And many do not have the time to do the research.”

Institutional Knowledge and Support

Post-secondary institutions should understand the students they are enrolling and commit to assisting them along their journey. Tinto’s (1975) model of retention is based on the premise that students must receive both social and academic support from their institutions in order to stay in school and be successful. However, according to five of the seven female military spouses interviewed for this study, many colleges and universities seem to be lacking in support services for female military spouses. Paige described her experience when first being admitted to a graduate program at the University of Tennessee – Knoxville as being a challenge. When asked if she had encountered any academic support services from her institution, she stated that she first went to the Veterans Affairs Office on campus with the hope of finding some answers. She stated,

“They basically told me that there was no one on campus who assisted military spouses and instructed me to seek help from my academic advisor.” These challenges also impacted Paige inside the classroom. She recalls an interaction with a professor where she asked for a brief extension to finish an assignment because her husband was going TDY.

I was going to be away from my husband for at least three months, and I needed to drive several hours in order to see him. I requested an extension, explaining my circumstances, and the professor told me they did not know why I was requesting an extension and that it was denied. Long separations should qualify as major life events, and I wish my professors knew more about the struggles associated with those students who are living in the military community.

Paige continued to describe her experience and felt thankful that she was assigned to an advisor who was willing to assist her in multiple ways. Meg recounted her experiences at George Washington University and also felt that her institution was failing to serve female military spouses.

There is like a military club on campus, but the focus is on the veterans but not the spouses. The most support I have received from my institution is how to utilize my Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits. I am grateful for that assistance, but it is just not enough.

For those individuals who are enrolled in a completely online program, problems with finding institutional support are incredibly prevalent. Laura stated that although her institution is known for enrolling those individuals living within the military population,

there are not any services designed to assist with female military spouses. Laura said the following:

There is an online military support group through the university, but I do not really use it for much. When I tried to get online and connect with classmates and faculty members, I felt like it was more for active duty service members or retired military, rather than the spouses. There were a lot of discussions about how to take what was learned in the military and apply it to a real-world career. I just felt that those discussions did not pertain to me as a military spouse.

The female spouses interviewed for this study believed that institutions could make more of an effort to understand underserved populations. During the interview, Michelle pointed out that just having one professional on campus assisting military spouses would make a huge difference. “By putting one person on campus who understood the military lifestyle and could help military spouses navigate through the education process would be the next level for those who claim they are military friendly.”

Community Support and Assistance

The final overarching theme found throughout the interview process was the need for community support and assistance. Due to the constant stress associated with frequent moves, long separations, and high-stress environments, all seven participants emphasized the importance of establishing an external support system while living this lifestyle. According to Rea et al. (2015), “While some military families are resilient to lengthy deployments and reintegration, others may experience stress that challenges their emotional health and family well-being” (p. 329). The participants indicated that these challenges are especially difficult when being enrolled in a post-secondary degree

program. However, establishing a community and support system can combat many of those negative feelings. Elizabeth discussed the relationships she has built with the people involved in her residency programs and how frequent communication has helped her through her husband's travels. She emphasized how much time her classmates spend together, as their residency is intense. Elizabeth says, "We grew close to each other quickly. We are all parents, with kids who are different ages, but we relate to each other. Many are military spouses and interacting with them helps me get through the tough times." For those individuals who are struggling to find their support systems, continuing a program becomes a challenge. Michelle found that her interactions with other military spouses and their inability to relate to her educational goals has made finding a community very difficult.

In our FRG group, there are no other individuals seeking higher education. With that being said, there has not been anyone I can talk to about the stressors and challenges I am going through. Those of us who are enrolled in higher education, we are like the anomaly. Although the lack of support has not kept me from enrolling every semester, it has made the day to day coping much more difficult. Leigh also affirmed the need for community support and was thankful that she was able to establish connections through her work with the Red Cross. Although Leigh enjoys being a military spouse, she has not always felt comfortable in the military community. Leigh explained, "Things were like that until I started volunteering at the Red Cross. That has been awesome because I have made friends and felt more comfortable living inside my community." She continued by emphasizing the importance of establishing a group of

people who could assist her through the emotional stressors associated with being part of the military.

The need for community assistance with managing children and childcare was also a frequent sub-theme mentioned by six out of the seven participants. Although many military installations have child development centers, the participants of the study stated they were full and often requiring a waitlist. For others, military childcare centers were not an option due to the size of the installation or the family's distance from the installation. Laura discussed her challenges with finding childcare because her family was not living on a military installation.

It was difficult because we were away from family and did not have much of a support group. There was no one to watch the kids so that I could attend classes. Even though the post offered hourly childcare, it was difficult for me to drive down there and then drive back all of the time. I felt like I had to choose between being present for my children or dedicating myself to school. I felt like I was being split in half.

Laura often described herself as being a single parent and trying to balance her family's needs when her husband was gone. Leigh reaffirmed Laura's statement about being a single parent and the emotional stress that was brought on when her husband was away, and she found herself needing additional support. "It is hard to focus on school when I am in a negative and emotional space. Plus, I have to save my energy for our child since we do not have outside childcare." When the participants were asked about what could assist them through these challenges, they all believed that having additional childcare support for female military spouses in school would be helpful. Paige commented,

During the times that my husband is gone and I have a night class, it would be great to have the option to drop off my child with a childcare center through the community. The schools schedule these required night courses, but nobody considers the need for childcare support.

Summary

By collecting and comparing the narratives outlined in the transcripts, this chapter was able to identify the emergent themes found throughout the interviews. The themes discovered during the interview process were geographic stability, program accessibility, institutional knowledge and support, and community support and assistance. Each participant was able to express the barriers faced by female military spouses who are currently in the process of pursuing higher education. Although each participant described their personal experiences in different ways, the underlying themes corresponded on multiple levels. In Chapter V, an in-depth discussion of these themes and how they relate to the literature outlined in Chapter I and Chapter II will be conducted. In addition, the implications of the study and recommendations for future research will also be outlined in the following chapter.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

By using a narrative approach in qualitative research, this study set out to discover the external barriers faced by female military spouses who are currently pursuing higher education. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings of the research based on the participants' responses. In addition, Chapter V will also evaluate the findings, limitations, recommendations for future research, and close with the thoughts and conclusions.

Summary of the Study

Through the use of personal narratives, the goal of this study was to gain a better understanding of female military spouses currently enrolled in a post-secondary degree program and discuss the potential obstacles they may have encountered during their journey. Over the years, there has been an influx of research completed on the military community; however, the majority of that research has been focused on active duty service members and war returning veterans. There has been very little research completed on military spouses and the challenges that accompany the military lifestyle. Investigating the experience of female military spouses in higher education is just one way to learn more about this specific group of individuals. Participant interviews were conducted over the course of several weeks, and each female military spouse was allowed to share her personal story. Although each participant expressed their stories in different ways, several themes and sub-themes were noted by the researcher. Overall, each

participant was able to speak to the following themes: geographic stability, program accessibility, institutional knowledge and support, and community support and assistance. Although the female military spouses used in this study varied in age, geographic location, and branch of the military, they all experienced similar barriers in the world of higher education. By sharing these experiences through this study, the hope is that additional research can be conducted, and efforts can be made to understand these students.

Analysis of the Findings

In Chapter I and Chapter II of this study, a theoretical framework was established and supporting literature was outlined to illustrate the need for additional research on this subject. Tinto's (1987) retention theory was the primary theoretical framework used to detail the relationships between female military spouses and the barriers they face while pursuing higher education. In order to better understand the factors of retention in female military spouses, the first research question asked the following:

- For female military spouses, how has the military lifestyle impacted their educational experiences?

Based on the information collected during the interviews, the military lifestyle had a large impact on the female military spouses interviewed during the study and their ability to remain in school. According to all of the participants, factors, such as geographic location and program accessibility, played a large part in their ability to enroll in school continuously. As outlined in Chapter I, many institutions view the issue of retention through the lens of institutional interest; however, the student's perspective is often overlooked. Through the perspective of the seven female military spouses interviewed for

this study, remaining in school was impacted by the challenges associated with living the military lifestyle. If institutions are looking to assist female military spouses in areas of retention, they must look beyond their interests and begin to understand the interests of their students. Based on the information provided during the interviews, female military spouses are interested in enrolling in an easily accessible program and understanding of their life circumstances.

This information leads to the second research question, which asked the following:

- What perceptions do female military spouses have on how the military lifestyle has shaped their access and retention ability in their educational program?

To answer this question, the researcher reflected on some specific quotes found throughout the participant interviews. Overall, all seven participants agreed that having access to post-secondary education was not a problem during the application process. As long as they did their research on what institutions were available near their current duty station or which programs were offered online, applying for admission was not difficult. However, the “roadblocks” started to occur once they were actively enrolled in classes. Several participants stated that the lack of academic and support services from the institutions made access and retention difficult. While others stated that it was the lack of community and emotional support that made continuing their education troublesome. Although each participant experienced different circumstances that caused certain problems with access and retention, the participants agreed that these issues were directly associated with life in the military.

The final research question presented in the study was as follows:

- What are the personal experiences of female military spouses regarding the barriers or challenges of pursuing a college degree?

As described in Chapter IV, each participant added her own personal experiences regarding the challenges of being a female military spouse enrolled in a college degree program. Many of the participants spoke of their challenges with deployments and relocations, while others talked about their difficulties with certifications and licensures. Overall, the analysis of these experiences speaks to the uniqueness of the military population and how important it is for institutions across the country to understand what services they can provide to help with retention. Each female military spouse has a different experience to share when it comes to continuing her education, and those experiences deserve to be heard.

In order to answer the final sub-questions for this research study, analyzing theories of self-efficacy and sense of belonging must also be completed. In Chapter I, self-efficacy was discussed as the process of providing students with more than just academic skills to ensure success; institutions must also assist in reshaping the student's ability to succeed in other ways (Hall & Ponton, 2005). Some students enter higher education with a strong sense of self-efficacy and what will help them succeed, while others do not. In addition, a sense of belonging addresses how students see themselves as a member of a community in the eyes of faculty, staff, and other students (Tinto, 2017). Many believe that creating a sense of belonging within a college community is crucial for the overall success of a college student. Although this process can be more difficult for

those individuals enrolled in a fully online program, it remains important, nonetheless.

The two sub-questions explored for this study were

- Based on personal experience, what are some of the programs or resources believed to be missing from institutions, specifically regarding support services for military spouses?
- How can the U.S. military better assist female military spouses in their educational pursuits?

These sub-questions were designed to explore the relationship between self-efficacy and sense of belonging with the experiences expressed by each participant.

All seven of the participants stated during their interview that there were not any specific programs or resources at their institution designed to assist female military spouses along their educational journey. Laura spoke about an online military community that she explored when she first enrolled in her program. However, she was disappointed when she realized that the community was aimed at active duty service members. Meg discussed how she received assistance in using her Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits but was discouraged when she was not able to connect with other military spouses like herself. As outlined in the literature review, many institutions label themselves as military friendly. However, this distinction is often part of a broken system that institutions use as a recruitment tactic. The distinction of military friendly should go beyond accepting financial resources and focus on the inclusivity of the military population, which includes female military spouses. By establishing connections and resources for all different types of students, self-efficacy and a sense of belonging may be achieved.

The final step was to analyze how the military can assist female military spouses in their educational pursuits. All seven of the participants stated that they were either unable to use any of the services offered through their local military installation or were not aware of any services that existed. These statements continue to illustrate the need for additional information on female military spouses who are pursuing higher education. As it was outlined earlier, there are very few resources provided to female military spouses by their institutions aimed at assisting them achieve their educational goals. Similarly, there are very few resources provided to female military spouses through their local military installations. Three of the participants indicated that they felt the military community did not understand spouses who were pursuing higher education and that many military leaders were unconcerned with whether or not they were successful in their pursuits. This feeling suggests that the U.S. military also needs to take an active role in understanding female military spouses and the support services they need to achieve their educational goals.

Limitations of the Study

The first limitation identified during the study involved the inclusionary criteria, specifically regarding the type of degree program the participants in which they were enrolled. As long as the participant was enrolled in some post-secondary program, they qualified for the study. The researcher was unable to know if the challenges faced by the participant were due to the program's intensity or course load. Depending on the type of program and the level of degree they were pursuing, the participants may have experienced more significant barriers than others currently enrolled in school. In order to gain a more generalized sample, the researcher was interested in pursuing all-female

military spouses in higher education, not just those spouses enrolled in specific degree tracks.

The sample size of seven participants can also be considered a limitation of the study; this small sample may not be seen as an interpretation of the entire female military spouse population. If a larger sample size would have been used in this study, reporting data in the form of percentages may have been used to illustrate the findings. Given the type of methodology for this particular study, the researcher was looking to reach saturation with participant responses and produce a detailed record of what was discussed during the interviews.

The participant's willingness to share her personal experiences can also be viewed as a limitation of the study. Because the interviews were conducted over the telephone, the willingness of the participant and environmental conditions may have played a role in the responses provided throughout the interaction. Depending on the current life circumstances of each participant, her honesty towards each interview question, and her mindset regarding the entire research process, the accuracy of the information should be taken into consideration. Although each participant was asked to give a truthful account of her experiences as a female military spouse in higher education, the information gathered was based on each participant's willingness to share her story.

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to explore the external barriers faced by female military spouses in pursuit of higher education. The results of this study indicate that additional research is needed in many areas concerning female military spouses and how

they experience post-secondary education. Based on the responses from the participants, the researcher suggests the following recommendations:

- Recommendation #1: Analysis of Current On-Campus Military Resource Centers
- Recommendation #2: Analysis of Current Military Installation Education Centers

For Recommendation #1, future research can study current on-campus military resource centers from several institutions across the United States. This type of study may reveal a more in-depth account of what institutions are doing for female military spouses and make direct recommendations based on those results. Researchers could interview students who access those military resource centers and disseminate what initiatives may be needed to assist all those individuals who live within the military population. These initiatives may assist with geographic transfer support, faculty and staff training programs, and community outreach.

For Recommendation #2, future research can look to analyze the resources being offered by military installation education centers and what improvements can be made for those individuals looking to access information. Future researchers could conduct a quantitative study through the use of an in-depth survey, asking female military spouses to speak on their experiences with military education centers. A Likert-type scale survey with additional comment boxes may gather information on how students are using services and where improvements could be made. By gathering these data, military leaders may be able to develop and amend current programs within the organization and gain insight into female military spouses' perceptions of current resources.

Implications of the Study

As a military spouse and administrator in higher education, the researcher understood the need for a study that would highlight the experiences of other female military spouses in higher education and bring forth additional information to an underserved population. The findings brought forth from this study add new evidence to the idea that military spouses are under-researched and overlooked by many in higher education. The stories of the seven participants interviewed for this study will provide context to educators and policymakers alike, regarding barriers faced by female military spouses who are enrolled in a post-secondary degree program. Providing information and context to these individuals may not only induce further research but also spark the idea that additional services need to be given to those individuals struggling along their journey. Based on the lack of information specifically related to military spouses, it is clear that additional studies need to be conducted. The researcher of this study understands that she must continue to research this population and make a conscious effort to educate others within academia on the difficulties faced by female military spouses in higher education. Through the use of continuous study and publication, the researcher plans to continue supporting this community through advocacy and education. If university administrators and military leaders are concerned with supporting everyone living within the military community, they should understand the need for additional research and use the stories collected in this study as a starting point for change.

Conclusion

Institutions of higher education are always seeking to gain a better understanding of the students they enroll. Through academics, programs, and services, they aim to support students in multiple ways and assist in the overall success of each individual. After the September 11th terrorist attacks on the United States and the beginning of the Global War on Terrorism, there has been an increase in research regarding military service members and college enrollment. However, very little data are available on the experiences of female military spouses in higher education (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). This study aimed to identify a few of the barriers experienced by female military spouses who are currently enrolled in higher education. The results of the study concluded that female military spouses are faced with challenges associated with geographic stability, program accessibility, institutional knowledge and support, and community support and assistance. Although the participants of this study understand that many students face challenges when completing education, they perceived that their circumstances were often overlooked and misunderstood. The stories collected during this study provides evidence towards the theory that female military spouses experience a variety of barriers during their educational pursuits. By acknowledging these females and making strides to understand their experiences, leaders within the military and within higher education can officially say, “thank you for your service.”

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Recruitment Post and Flyer

Hello Fellow Group Members,

My name is Richelle Keilholz, and I am a doctoral student in the Education Curriculum and Leadership program at Columbus State University in Columbus, Georgia. As a higher education professional and a military spouse of over ten years, I have taken an interest in the exploring the external barriers of female military spouses during their pursuit of higher education. For the purpose of my study, I am looking for female military spouses currently enrolled in a post-secondary degree program. The purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the external barriers faced by female military spouses who are pursuing programs and/or degrees in higher education.

To participate in the study, you must meet the following criteria: 1) female, 2) legally married to an active duty service member (any branch), and 3) currently enrolled in any type of college program (traditional or online). By volunteering, you will be asked to participate in a 30- to 60-minute interview with the researcher. The interviews will be recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Each participant will be given a pseudonym to protect her confidentiality, as well as the opportunity to verify the information outlined in her transcript. All documents and audio recordings will be kept in a locked, secured location. Only the researcher will have access to the materials. As stated previously, this process is completely voluntary, and participants may withdraw from the study at any time.

If you meet the listed criteria and may be interested in participating in the study, please contact me at keilholz_richelle@columbusstate.edu.

Sincerely,

Richelle Keilholz
Doctoral Candidate
College of Education & Health Professions
Columbus State University

Research Participants Needed

Seeking Female Military Spouses Enrolled in
a Post-Secondary Degree Program

What's the study about?

The purpose of the study is to identify and analyze the external barriers faced by female military spouses who are pursuing programs/degrees in higher education.

Who can participate?

- Participants must be female
- Legally married to an active duty service member (any branch)
- Enrolled in a any type of college program (traditional or online)

What are the benefits?

There are no direct benefits or compensation for participating in the study. Participation is a volunteer process.

What is involved?

Participants will complete a telephone interview, during a day and time that is convenient . The interview will take 30 to 60 minutes to complete and will be recorded. The interviews will be confidential and pseudonyms will be used in the study.

**Study Title: Exploring the External Barriers Faced by Female
Military Spouses in Pursuit of Higher Education**

Interested?

Contact Richelle Keilholz, EdD Candidate
Columbus State University

Facebook Messenger or at keilholz_richelle@columbusstate.edu

Appendix B

Letter to Prospective Participant

Dear Prospective Participant,

I am a doctoral student in the Education Curriculum and Leadership program at Columbus State University in Columbus, Georgia. As a higher education professional and a military spouse of over ten years, I have taken an interest in the exploring the external barriers of female military spouses during their pursuit of higher education. With that being said, this letter serves as a formal invitation to take part in a qualitative research study about your experiences as a military spouse enrolled in a post-secondary education program. You are being invited to participate in this research study because you are a female military spouse enrolled in higher education.

Your participation in this research study will involve a recorded telephone interview, during a date and time that is convenient for you. The questions will be open-ended in nature and will focus on your personal experiences. Once transcription of each interview has been completed, you will be sent a copy of your interview transcript to verify validity.

Only the researcher will have access to the data and it will be securely locked inside the researcher's home. The data will be kept on file for a period of five years. Each participant's identity will be kept confidential and only pseudonyms will be used to distinguish between participants. To my knowledge, the interview you will participate in will have no more risk or harm than you would experience during your everyday life.

If you choose to participate, please sign and send in the attached Informed Consent Waiver. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your potential participation, please feel free to contact me at [REDACTED].

Sincerely,

Richelle Keilholz, M.S.
Doctoral Candidate
College of Education & Health Professions
Columbus State University

Kimberly McElveen, PhD
Chair, Dissertation
Committee
College of Education &
Health Professions

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Informed Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a research project conducted by Richelle Keilholz, a student in the doctoral program in the Education Curriculum and Leadership Department at Columbus State University. Dr. Kimberly McElveen will be supervising the study and will be listed as a co-principle investigator for the study.

I. Purpose:

The purpose of this project is to identify and analyze the external barriers faced by military spouses when pursuing higher education. Through qualitative data collection, each female military spouse participating in the study will be given the opportunity to tell her individual story. By documenting the personal perspectives of the participants, a deeper understanding of the topic will be understood. The information brought forth by the study may also assist higher education administrators make decisions on policy and programs that impact this population. Furthermore, the study aims to identify the gaps in research, in order to recommend future study opportunities.

II. Procedures:

Your participation in this research study will involve a recorded telephone interview, during a date and time that is convenient for you. The questions will be open-ended in nature and will focus on your personal experiences. The interview should take approximately 30 to 60 minutes to complete. Once transcription of each interview has been completed, you will be sent a copy of your interview transcript to verify validity. The data collected during this study will only be used for dissertation publication and associated presentations. The information collected during the study will not be used for future research projects.

III. Possible Risks or Discomforts:

To my knowledge, the interview you will participate in will have no more risk or harm than you would experience during your everyday life.

IV. Potential Benefits:

The potential benefit to participating in this study will be providing potential helpful information to those who work closely with military students.

V. Costs and Compensation:

There are not costs or compensation associated with participating in this study.

VI. Confidentiality:

Each participant's identity will be kept confidential and only pseudonyms will be used to distinguish between participants during the study. Only the researcher will know the real name of each participant. The researcher will be the only person with access to the data, and it will be securely locked on the researcher's computer, inside the researcher's home.

The audio recordings will be kept on file in a locked computer filing system until transcription documentation and verification are complete. Once transcripts are finalized, the audio recordings will be deleted from the researcher's computer immediately. The remaining documents will be kept on file for a period of five years and then deleted from the researcher's computer.

VII. Withdrawal:

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time, and your withdrawal will not involve penalty or loss of benefits.

For additional information about this research project, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Richelle Keilholz at [REDACTED] or keilholz_richelle@columbusstate.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact Columbus State University Institutional Review Board at irb@columbusstate.edu.

I have read this informed consent form. If I had any questions, they have been answered. By signing this form, I agree to participate in this research project.

Signature of Participant

Date

Appendix D

Participant Confirmation Email

Hello <Insert Participant Name>,

This email serves as the confirmation in your participation of the study *Exploring the External Barriers of Female Military Spouses in Pursuit of Higher Education*. Based on the information you provided, the following date and time has been scheduled to the complete the interview. If you have any questions or need to make adjustments to your interview time, please feel free to contact me at the contact information listed below.

NAME: <INSERT PARTICIPANT NAME>

INTERVIEW DATE: <INSERT DATE>

INTERVIEW TIME: <INTERVIEW TIME>

Sincerely,

Richelle Keilholz, M.S.
Doctoral Candidate
College of Education and Health Professions
Columbus State University
Phone: [REDACTED]
Email: keilholz_richelle@columbusstate.edu

Appendix E

Pre-Interview Checklist and Script

Date:

Participant Name:

Before we begin, I would like to thank you for participating in this interview and agreeing to be a part of the research study. The hope that this will be a positive experience, that will allow me to learn more about your personal story as a female military spouse and college student. As you know, the purpose of this study is to explore the external barriers faced by female military spouses in pursuit of higher education.

First, I would like to take a moment to once again review the Informed Consent Form you signed on <DATE OF SIGNED CONSENT FORM>. The purpose of this form is to ensure that you understand your rights as a participant and recognize my commitment to you as a participant regarding anonymity. Please take a moment to once again review the form.

(ALLOW PARTICIPANT THE OPPORTUNITY TO REVIEW FORM)

Do you have any questions before we begin?

(If no questions are asked, recording device will be turned on and interview will begin.)

(If participant has questions, those will be addressed until no additional questions are asked.)

Appendix F

Interview Questions

Participant Pseudonym:

- 1) To begin, can you please state your first name and age for the record.
- 2) Can you please give me a brief history as a female military spouse (e.g., years as a spouse, military branch of husband, past/current duty stations)?
- 3) Tell me about your current degree program; please be specific in terms of institution, part-time/full-time enrollment, major, and online vs. traditional classes.
- 4) From your personal experience, how has the military lifestyle impacted your ability to enroll and matriculate in your current college program?
- 5) What has your experience been using military-related resources to pay for your program?
- 6) Have you encountered any academic support services, primarily focused or designed to help female military spouses in school?
- 7) Have you encountered any social support services, primarily focused or designed to help female military spouses in school?
- 8) Based on your academic and social support service encounters, do you have any recommendations for your institution moving forward?
- 9) What would be three of the biggest challenges you have faced regarding living the military lifestyle and completing a college program?
- 10) Have you heard of any education support services offered through your current base or post? If so, have you accessed those services?
- 11) From your personal experience, what programs or resources may be missing from your current base or post that may assist female military spouses in their college programs?
- 12) In your opinion, did your active duty service member's career impact your ability to pursue a college education?
- 13) Are you currently on track to graduate from your degree program? If not, what is your timeline?

Appendix G

Participant Interview Follow-Up Email

Dear <Insert Participant Name>,

Thank you once again for taking the time to participate in my research study. Attached to this email, you will see the interview transcript from your interview. Please read over it and let me know if there are any major edits you would like me to make. If you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Richelle Keilholz, M.S.
Doctoral Candidate
College of Education and Health Professions
Columbus State University
Phone: [REDACTED]
Email: keilholz_richelle@columbusstate.edu

Appendix H

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

● CSU IRB

October 29, 2019 at 9:24 AM

Details

CI

Protocol 20-020 Exempt Approval

To: Richelle Keilholz, Kimberly McElveen, Cc: CSU IRB, Institutional Review Board

Institutional Review Board
Columbus State University

Date: 10/29/2019

Protocol Number: 20-020

Protocol Title: Exploring the External Barriers Faced by Female Military Spouses in Pursuit of Higher Education

Principal Investigator: Richelle Keilholz

Co-Principal Investigator: Kimberly McElveen

Dear Richelle Keilholz:

The Columbus State University Institutional Review Board or representative(s) has reviewed your research proposal identified above. It has been determined that the project is classified as exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations and has been approved. You may begin your research project immediately.

Please note any changes to the protocol must be submitted in writing to the IRB before implementing the change(s). Any adverse events, unexpected problems, and/or incidents that involve risks to participants and/or others must be reported to the Institutional Review Board at irb@columbusstate.edu or (706) 507-8634.

If you have further questions, please feel free to contact the IRB.

Sincerely,
Manasa Mamidi, Graduate Assistant

Institutional Review Board

Columbus State University

**** Please note that the IRB is closed during holidays, breaks, or other times when the IRB faculty or staff are not available. Visit the *IRB Scheduled Meetings* page on the IRB website for a list of upcoming closures. ****